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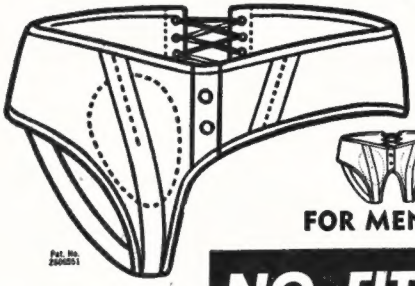

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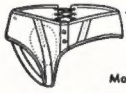

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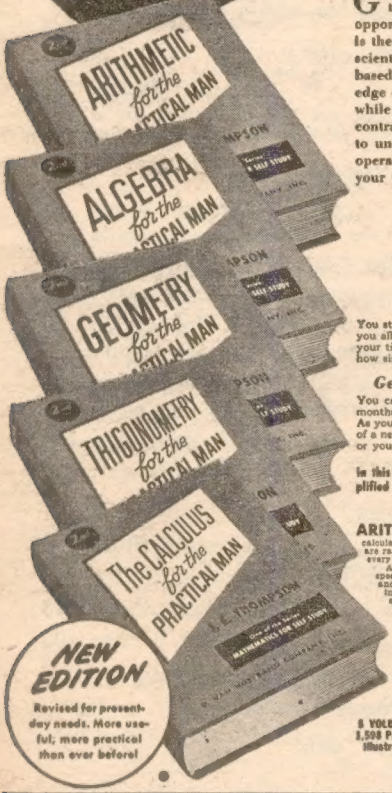
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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 55, No. 1 JUNE, 1954

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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Only his name was known. He was a whisper, a shadow, yet the Lone Wolf must find him within a single week

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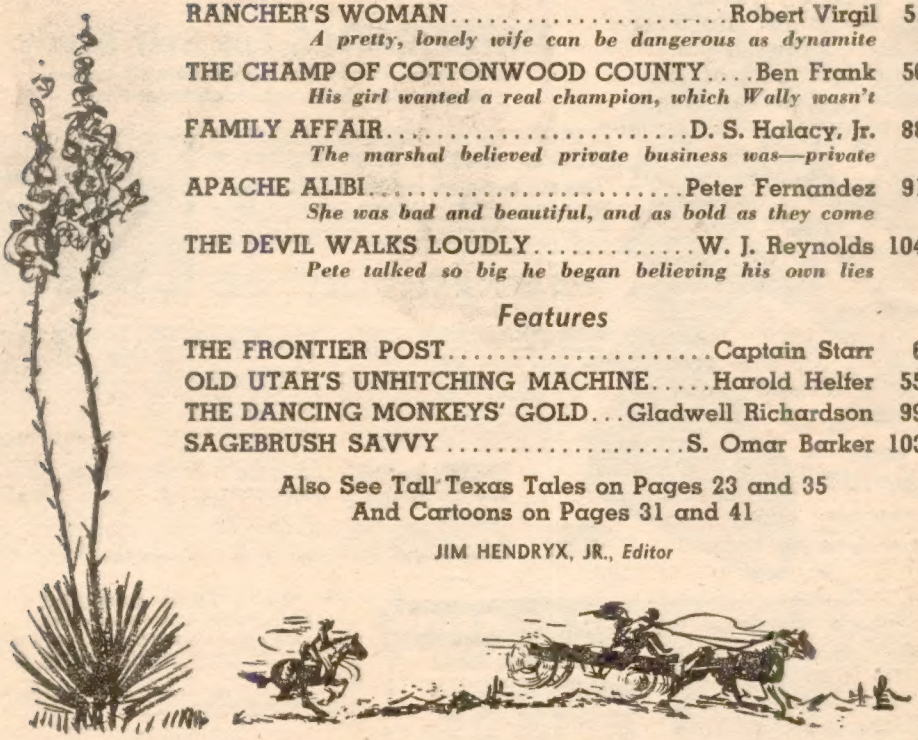
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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Vengeance the Desert Way

THE scene taking place on the Arizona desert was as strange as a mirage. Several mounted Apaches swooped down on the lone white man, grabbing him, tearing the clothes from his body, and the shoes from his feet. Then with thorny sticks and rawhide thongs, they lashed at the naked figure until blood ran from the man's body in great streams.

For the white man, Claude Batailleur, it was no mirage, no illusion. It was agony beyond human endurance. A cry on his lips, he gambled for his life. He rolled on the hot sand, his motions resembling those of a snake. He stood on his head, and he turned handsprings. He raised his voice in terrible shrieks. He babbled and sang.

The Apaches, fear in their eyes, stood back, watching the performance. Then as furtively as they had come, they left, leaving the naked white man who was "touched by the Gods."

Tremendous Trek

Batailleur continued his antics until they were gone. Then, with the terrible heat pressing down on him, he put on the remnants of clothing. But his shoes had been taken with the Apaches. He started his journey for the mining town of Globe, an impossible distance for a man in his condition.

Yet as he struggled, he was grateful that his life had been spared, even if the Apaches did regard him as being crazy. Like many Indian tribes, the Apaches attached special importance to the non-normal among all things living. Because of their belief about Batailleur, he had been given protection before an unfortunate incident which had made Victorio, the Apache leader, turn against him.

Without doubt, the Frenchman, known as Burro Frenchy, was a strange one even to the whites of Arizona Territory. He had come to America in 1871, a refugee from Paris, France. Speaking little English, he talked of being a soldier for Napoleon during the Franco-Prussian war.

In Paris, he had a wife, and a daughter he'd never seen and a laundry business he had to pay off. The answer was to search for treasures, and with this in mind, he left the Colorado mining town of Trinidad, and came with the first party into the area of Globe, Arizona.

Fighting Frenchy

A gay, laughing Frenchman was Burro Frenchy, and everybody liked him. They liked his singing and his great prowess as a fighter and wrestler, and they liked the way he mutilated the English language. Once, in the mining town of Clifton, a miner beat him up — a rare occurrence. It was because, said Burro Frenchy, he was "three sheet weendy." Or, translated, "Three sheets in the wind."

Some ten years after he left France, Burro Frenchy received a package of citations and medals from France for unusual service in the late Franco-Prussian war. These spurred his efforts to find treasure and return to Paris for his wife and daughter, but though he found a little he always missed out on the big strikes, despite his advantage of having favor with the raiding Apaches. He finally decided to try a new business — hog raising. In partnership with a Mexican, he drove a herd of the porkers from Silver City to the ranch the Mexican owned in the Globe area. Then Victorio's Apaches raided the ranch.

"Do not make the fight, amigo," Frenchy urged his partner. "They weel not 'arm me."

The Mexican was unwilling to chance this. He opened fire on the raiders. A brave

toppled from his horse. And with great fury the Apaches came in from all sides, killing the Mexican. Before Burro Frenchy could escape, he found himself a captive.

The Indians decreed that he be banished for always from Apacheland. Even at this time, which was before Frenchy put on his mad act, Victorio and Geronimo believed he was "touched by the Gods," so they spared his life.

"Twenty-four hours you have to escape," the Apache leader said. "After that time, you will no longer be protected."

Cruelly Crippled

It was twenty-four hours later that the Apaches swept down upon Burro Frenchy, stripped him of his clothing, and left in fear as he feigned insanity.

Impossible as the journey to Globe was considered, Burro Frenchy made it. But he was never the same. His feet were broken and maimed, his body enfeebled from the beatings and the sun. And his beautiful singing voice was gone. In fact his voice had become an almost unintelligible croak.

For over twenty years Burro Frenchy was a familar figure in Globe and in other desert towns. And an unforgettable figure in his deformity. Then he made a fairly rich strike at a place called Troy, and finally headed for Paris.

The trip back to his native France was a nightmare to Burro Frenchy. He was stared at and talked about. He could not, Frenchy decided, even face his faithful wife — the woman who had nursed him when he had been wounded while in Napoleon's Army.

Fickle Fortune

Friends then changed his mind about seeing his wife and daughter Josephine. His wife reacted as Burro Frenchy had hoped — she welcomed him with warm embraces. But not so the daughter. She would not accept this scarecrow of a man as her father.

Brokenhearted at his daughter's reaction, Burro Frenchy returned to Arizona with his wife. His business deals were shrewd, so that in time he had collected a small fortune. Yet when he died, in 1934, he was almost broke. His heart was broken, too, because he'd never seen his grandson who was killed in World War I.

Apache vengeance on the desert had run its strange course.

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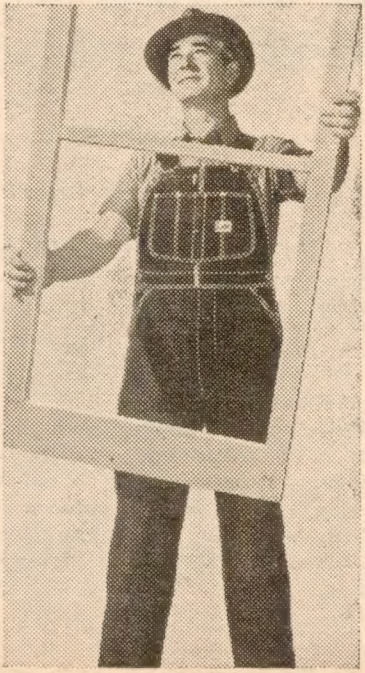

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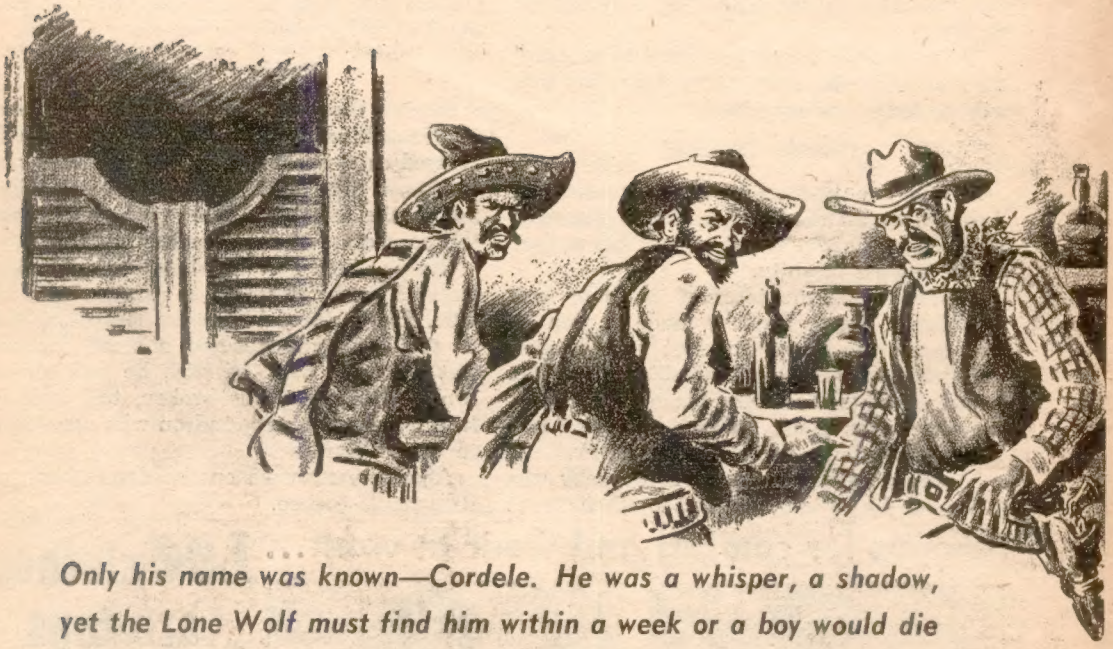


Only his name was known—Cordele. He was a whisper, a shadow, yet the Lone Wolf must find him within a week or a boy would die

CHAPTER I

Desert Stop-over

RANGER JIM HATFIELD, known throughout Texas as the Lone Wolf, rode through a break in the low sand hills. A dog's sharp, excited barking pulled him forward in saddle of his golden sorrel, alertness stiffening his slack frame.

Midmorning sun beat down on the scene spread out below him. The desert began here, lapping aridly against the sparse-growthed hills. And like a restless sea it stretched away to the far black hills that made a forbidding barrier against the gun-metal sky forty miles away.

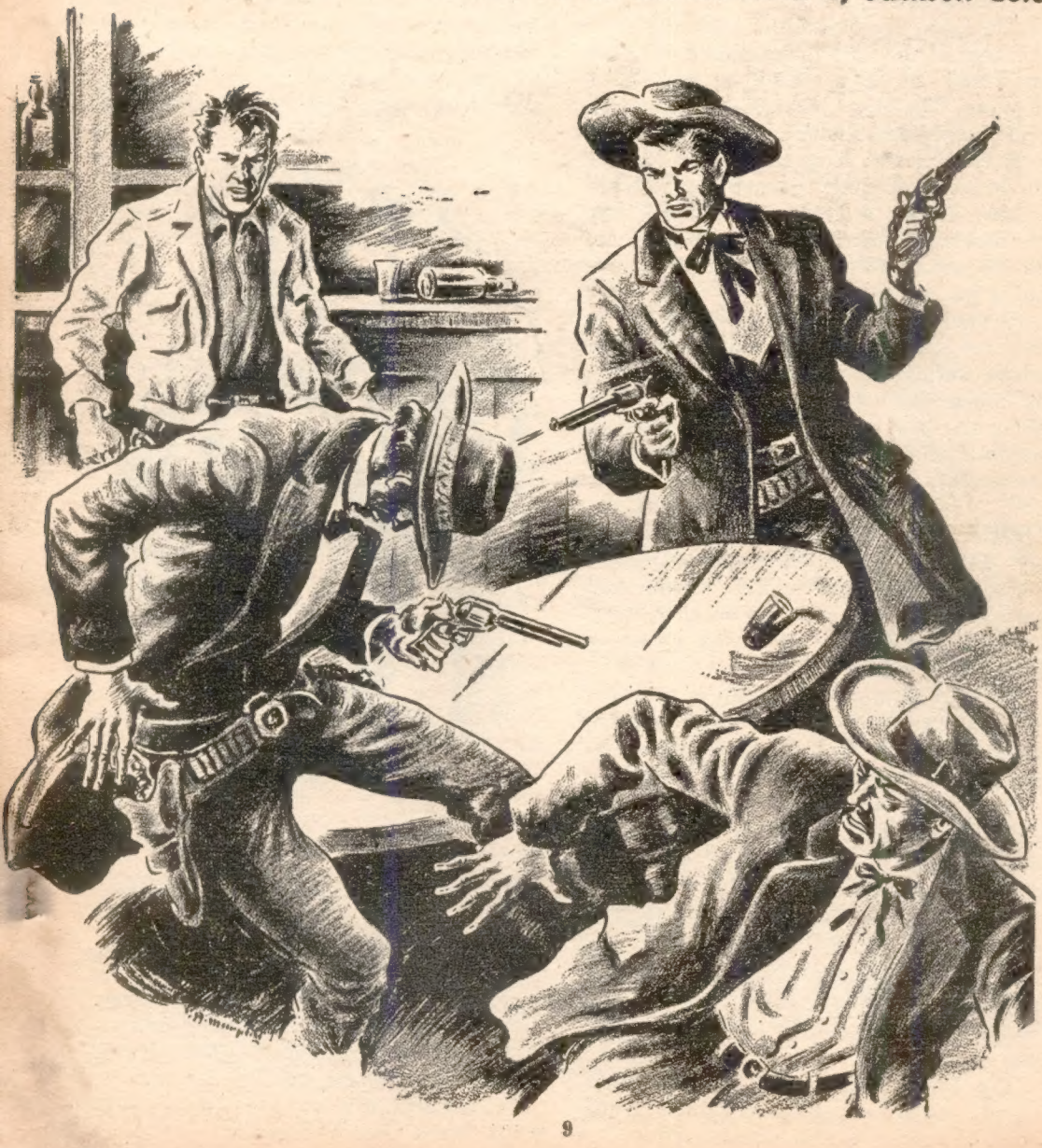
Hatfield settled back in saddle, his striking green-gray eyes making a slow survey of the scene a thousand yards below him. A clump of cottonwoods were a spot of green against the dun-gray world. Spiky grass sprawled like a shaggy carpet for about a hundred yards past the trees. A long, narrow adobe building faced the cottonwoods across a sun-baked yard. Behind the adobe were sheds and a pole corral. The corral was empty.

That was the picture. But in it two jarring notes brought a frown to the big Ranger's face.

A man lay sprawled face-down several feet in front of the open door. The barking dog was standing over the body. The big brindle animal kept looking up at the scavengers floating in lazy, patient circles

Nobody Knew

A Jim Hatfield Novel by Jackson Cole



above the yard. Further back, almost under the cottonwoods, an old Concord coach was tipped over on its side. The two lead horses were down, the stiff angles of their legs indicating death.

The other four horses stood patiently trapped in their harness, heads bowed to the brutal impact of the climbing desert sun.

Nothing else moved.

The Lone Wolf sat still, unmindful of the beat of the sun against his own wide shoulders. Slack in saddle, he was still a big man. The long black coat he wore was tight across his shoulders, dusty from a long ride, it was long enough to conceal the brace of .45 Colts thonged down on his thighs. Under a flat-crowned black hat his face was dark from sun and weather, darker now with a four-day beard roughening his jaw.

He had not been in this part of Texas in three years, and he couldn't place the adobe station below him. Nor the road—no more than wheel ruts—that angled along the base of the brown hills to this way station, then struck out boldly across the desert.

THE desert had always been a barrier, except to a few foolhardy prospectors —and Cordele's raiders. Yet someone had established a stage route across that burning hell, and had set up a way station, a jumping-off place.

Hatfield thoughtfully rubbed his jaw. "Doesn't look like there's much we can do down there, Goldy," he muttered to the sorrel, "except free those horses."

The golden stallion nodded vigorous assent. The sleek coat of the magnificent mount gleamed even through the alkali dust filming his body.

The dog ceased barking as the Ranger rode into the yard. The brindle settled back on his haunches, front paws resting lightly on the shoulders of the man lying face-down in the dirt. He rumbled a warning.

The Lone Wolf paused by the overturned stage, his narrowed glance on the body of a squat, oldish man lying just beyond. The coach had hidden this man when the Ranger had looked down from the hill. A shotgun lay a few feet away.

Jim Hatfield dismounted, studied the ground. In minutes he had a pretty accurate mind picture of what had happened here.

Three riders had come up to the station and had shot the bald-headed man as he had stepped out of the building. They had ridden on around the station, where they had temporarily hidden their horses, then had gone inside to wait.

When the stage had come racking out

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

of the desert, it had been met by murderous fire. The coach must have overturned as the driver had tried desperately to swing his team away, narrowly missing the shotgun guard's body as it went over.

This much Hatfield read; long experience had bred that facility in him. But if he was right, where was the driver?

The big brindle dog growled again, deep in his throat. Hatfield turned.

"Easy, boy. I won't hurt you."

The dog crouched down on his belly as the Ranger walked toward him.

"Don't blame you none," Hatfield said softly. "They shot your master. Probably while you were out in the back hills, chasing jacks, or they'd have finished you, too." Then he saw the dried blood on the brindle's left flank and his eyes hardened. "My mistake, feller," he muttered. "Reckon you were lucky to get away."

The brindle's growl changed to a questioning whine. He watched the big stranger with a new, more friendly manner, but as the Ranger knelt beside the body the brindle's lips writhed back, exposing white fangs.

Hatfield reached out and ran his hand along the dog's shaggy neck, roughing him behind the ears. "Let me take a look at him, feller. I won't hurt him." He had a firm, softly commanding voice that compelled obedience.

He turned the man over and looked down into a slack-mouthed face shaped by fifty years of outdoor living. The man had been shot twice, at close quarters. The .45-caliber slugs had punched clean through his thin frame.

Hunkered down on his heels, the Ranger looked at the small sign tacked over the door of the adobe:

APACHE

Under this, in smaller lettering was:

TRAVERS TRANSPORTATION COMPANY

Jim Hatfield was reaching inside his pocket for the makings when the brindle's ears suddenly went erect, and a low growl rumbled in his throat.

The Lone Wolf lunged around, Colt leveled, beating the gun that broke the sunshot stillness. Dobe chipped from the building. A wavering, stumbling, hatless figure was coming from the cottonwood clump, and the Ranger held his fire in that instant of quick thinking.

The man fell. He tried to drag himself to his feet, got as far as his hands and knees, then lay there, too spent for further effort. He made a try at getting his Colt up for another shot, but couldn't get the weapon off the ground.

Jim Hatfield paced to him. The stillness that pressed down in that yard was more intense, after the single racking explosion.

"Damn you, Rike!" the man sobbed. He was breathing in great, dragging gusts. "You came back to finish things. Now's your chance—"

HATFIELD bent down and pulled the Colt from the man's weakened grasp. He saw the ugly stain glistening in the man's chest.

"I'm not Rike," he said sharply. "Who are you?"

The lanky man's eyes focused slowly. He was a raw-boned, sinewy man of about forty, gaunt-faced and lean-flanked. What hair he had left was bleached almost white.

"Same build, same black outfit." He shook his head. "Not Rike, though. Sorry I—"

Hatfield holstered his Colt. "I'd better get you inside, out of this sun."

He bent over, hoisted the man up. The fellow was mumbling:

"Got to get the stage to Vulcan. Never broke a scheduled—run—in my life—"

He went limp in Hatfield's arms. The Ranger walked into the station with him. In the front room were benches and rough plank tables where passengers could eat their box lunches at this stage stop. The station agent's living quarters were in the rear. Hatfield carried the driver into this room and eased the man down on a neatly made-up bunk.

A quick inspection showed him that there was little he could do. The bullet that had gone into the man had not come out. He might not live to reach town, but getting him to a doctor was the man's only hope.

Grim-lipped, Hatfield walked back outside. There were a few chores he had to attend to before he could leave. He had to bury the two dead men, and drag the

carcasses of the horses far enough away from the station to let the scavengers feed. And he had to get the stage back into running condition, if possible, so that he could transport the wounded man.

Taking Goldy's bridle, he walked to the spring under the cottonwoods. The overflow caused a seepage for about a hundred feet before it sank out of sight in the thirsty earth. He filled his canteen and settled back, reaching for the makings while Goldy thrust his muzzle into the cool water.

He had come a long way in a hurry. But this was the end of the line. These mountains he saw were the Vulcans—and somewhere out in those waterless hills a will-o'-the-wisp outlaw called Cordele was holding as hostage a frightened ten-year-old boy.

The Ranger's face was harsh as he brought a light to the cigarette in his mouth. He had a week to find Jerome Cordele—a week to find the hideout of a man who was only a name and a reputation. A killer who had dared to ride boldly into Austin and within the very shadows of Ranger headquarters, kidnap the governor's son!

Hatfield had been north on a job when Captain Bill McDowell's wire had called him back. He had been filled in on details by a grim-lipped Ranger chief.

Cordele's brother, Link, Captain Bill had explained, was being held in prison, awaiting execution. The outlaw had been captured when Cordele's raiders had held up the Texas & Pacific passenger train, north of the Vulcans. Several of McDowell's Rangers, tipped off, had joined railroad police in smashing the holdup. During the fighting the mail car clerk and guard had been killed. Link Cordele had picked up a bullet when the raiders had been riding away. The posse had found him, next morning, huddled in a ravine where he had fallen.

His trial had been lengthily reported in the Austin *Leader*. He had been found guilty of murder and sentenced to hang.

Three weeks before the date of execution, young Ross Winterlee, son of the governor, had been kidnaped. A few days later a note had reached the lad's father, reading:

> An eye for an eye, Winterlee. Set my brother free, on a fast horse, and give him twenty-four hours grace. Or your boy's head will roll down the plaza the night following Link's hanging.

It had been signed "Cordele" in a flourishing, arrogant hand.

GOVERNOR WINTERLEE had sent for Hatfield. Across the big mahogany desk his worried eyes had lifted to the tall, grim man who long ago had been dubbed the Lone Wolf by Captain McDowell, and who had brought law and justice into the remotest corners of the big state.

"I can't set aside the verdict, Hatfield," he had said. "Link Cordele was fairly tried and he deserves to hang. But"—the knuckles of his fisted hands, on the desk, whitened, and he spoke thickly—"I could turn out the militia, I could set every available man to riding those hills. But Cordele would be long gone before they got close." He had sighed heavily. "I asked McDowell to send for you. Perhaps it is too much to ask of any man, even you, Hatfield. By the time you get out there you'll have less than a week. One week to find Cordele—and get my son back alive!"

Thinking now, remembering, the Ranger took a last pull at his cigarette before grinding it under his heel. He had little enough to go on. Cordele was a name, a whisper, a shadow. Descriptions of the outlaw varied. He was tall; he was short. Lean . . . dark . . . blond.

One lone clue had been supplied by Captain McDowell. "Has a funny way of holding a cigarette, Jim. Between the third and fourth finger of his right hand."

Small, but the one bit of description that had any reality among the thousand conflicting descriptions of Jerome Cordele. The way he held a cigarette!

That, and the anonymous message McDowell had received the day Hatfield had

been preparing to leave headquarters. A short, blunt note over which McDowell had scowled, then advised the Ranger to ignore. It had read:

> Captain William McDowell, Texas Rangers:
> If you want Cordele, send a man to Vulcan. Tell him to register in the Red Sand Hotel as B. Brown. I will get in touch with him.

The Ranger boss had been suspicious. And with reason. But Hatfield had known then, as he knew now, that he could not afford to overlook the message. He could lose a month scouring those desolate hills —and he had less than seven days!

He got up and turned to the unpleasant task at hand.

Two hours later he climbed up into the seat of the righted stage. The four-horse team had been watered and reharnessed, and were in fair condition for the run to Vulcan.

Up on the hill behind the station were two freshly dug graves. A big brindle dog crouched by the side of one—he had stubbornly resisted all efforts to get him into the coach.

The wounded driver, huddled on the cushions inside, was still unconscious. Goldy trotted alongside as Jim Hatfield took up the reins.

Vulcan was where his grim search would start. What better way to enter town than driving the desert stage?

CHAPTER II

Rough Hospitality

CORBY TRAVERS leaned heavily on his cane, staring bitterly toward the corner of the street in Vulcan around which the stage would come. He had been waiting for three hours and hope, dying hard, had left him with a sick and empty feeling.

Slowly, inch by inch, he sagged against the wooden support on the plank walk. He was seeing a dream die, and he was too old to start again. There had been other ventures—and other failures. And with each failure he had lost something of himself, had found it harder to try again.

His first blow had been the death of his wife, leaving him with an eager-eyed ten-year-old girl in his care. Before that he had been a schoolmaster in a small town in Iowa. He had not earned much, but he had been satisfied. After the shock of his wife's death, though, he had suddenly found himself restless and dissatisfied. He had taken his savings and his daughter and headed West—and one venture after another had gone wrong.

For eight years it had been a mania with him—to make the kind of money his wife had not lived to enjoy. To give to Melody Travers the financial advantages her mother had never known.

Somehow he had drifted into Vulcan, the dead-end town of a string of nondescript mining towns in this corner of west Texas. He knew about figures and bookkeeping, and he had taken work in Lathrop's General Merchandise store. He had not intended to stay.

Then he had met Ben Thompson, a half-baked mining engineer whose hobby had been prospecting, whose curse had been whisky. Thompson had stumbled across the old Apache trail through the Vulcans, had rediscovered the springs on the edge of the desert. He and Thompson had gone into this venture together. Then Thompson had died in a mining accident, a fall down a shaft.

It had been a crazy venture—a stage line across the desert to Morgan on the other side of the Vulcans—although the route cut two hundred miles from the regular run to that railroad town. No one believed it could be done. But now every merchant in Vulcan, and in the mining towns down the Gold Strip, were waiting to see if Travers would establish his line.

An old prospector shuffled up the street, leading a sad-faced burro loaded with supplies. He stopped beside Travers and wiped his mouth with the back of a ragged, greasy sleeve.

"Nary sign of it, eh?"

Corby Travers shook his head. Captain Bowers was a fixture in Vulcan—a desert rat who had been grubstaked at one time or another over the past ten years by every merchant in town.

He called himself Captain Bowers, but most people had shortened this to just plain "Cap." A stoop-shouldered, leathery-faced man, he had weak, watery blue eyes that blinked incessantly. White hair, stained a greasy yellow, curled over his ears. He had a habit of interspersing a mixture of nautical terms, in whatever he said, and stubbornly referred to the desert as a sea. He would smirk cunningly when he spoke of sunken treasure, and a hideout he often visited in that barren waste.

Long since no one had paid any attention to him.

Before he moved on with his burro, Melody Travers came out of an office behind the two men, and took her father's arm. "No use waiting any longer," she said. Her voice was bitter, implying much she preferred to leave unsaid. She had never liked the thought of settling in this raw mining town on the edge of nowhere.

Travers shrugged. "Might be Tab lost a wheel," he said. "Probably had to lay over at Apache."

He could not say what he actually believed must have happened. Melody said it for him. "Or Cordele's raiders stopped him!"

Captain Bowers snorted. He was peering down the street, nodding like an old burro. "Been cruising that desert nigh onto fifteen years, gal. Ain't never spied hide or hair of thet outlaw Cordele. 'Paches, sure. Near lifted my scalp couple times." He cackled, his words trailing off into a vague chittering.

TRAVERS bit his lip. The late afternoon traffic was whirring past. From back in the hills he could hear the *whrump, whrump* of the stamp mill. He was thinking that Dave Menock, manager of the Golden Nugget Mine back there would be in day after tomorrow. Menock was shipping via the Travers Transportation Line as a favor to him, Travers—risking fifteen thousand dollars in gold bars to bolster confidence in the new transportation line.

A bright red-wheeled gig came up the street. A woman in a long gray duster, and carrying a parasol, smiled at Travers. He waved, his eyes lighting. The woman's eyes shifted to Melody, but Corby Travers' daughter made no sign of welcome. The smile remained fixed on the woman's face. She spoke briefly to the driver who flicked the team lightly. They drove on, turning the corner.

Travers looked at his daughter. He knew how Melody felt about Madge Tucker. Melody was young, he reflected heavily, she had a youngster's black and white ideas about good and bad.

Madge worked for Ned Tain, who ran the biggest gambling saloon in Vulcan. She had a good voice that appealed to the men who nightly sought Tain's Oasis for entertainment. Madge was forty. She left the chorus kicking and other entertaining to the younger, painted women in Tain's employ. But of this Melody Travers had no understanding, and no tolerance.

Travers sighed as he turned back to his office, behind him. He had not told Melody he had asked Madge Tucker to marry him.

The girl remained on the plank walk, hating the ugliness of this town. Beside his burro Captain Bowers blinked against the lowering sun. Neither of them heard the man who rode up in the soft dust of the street until a young voice greeted:

"Afternoon, miss."

Melody turned. She saw a stranger on a bay horse, a young man with a pale blond stubble roughening a square chin. He wore a dusty brush jacket, unbuttoned, over a faded blue cotton shirt, black pants tucked into worn half boots, and a red silk sash was pulled in tight against a flat, hard stomach. That was a strange item of wearing apparel, the girl thought—something new in a drifter's wardrobe. Then her glance picked up the

Colt riding his right hip and hostility drew its protective shield around her.

"Yes?" Her voice was curt.

The stranger pushed his hat back and let his level gray eyes rest briefly on the blinking prospector gaping at him. His glance lifted to the newly painted sign over the office door and came back to the girl.

"I'm looking for a place called Tain's Oasis," he explained.

"You're looking in the wrong place!" Melody snapped. Her nerves were raw from waiting, and she distrusted everyone in Vulcan.

"I can see that, miss," he said patiently.

Her lips tightened. "Turn left at the corner. The big frame building in the middle of the block is the Oasis." Her sniff was a dismissal. "That's where all the riffraff hang out."

He nodded gravely. "Might be it's the place I'm looking for," he murmured. "Thanks." He turned the bay away and rode down the street.

Melody's glance followed him, and for a moment she was ashamed of her curtness. . . .

The stranger, Steve Westerly, rode through the ankle-deep sand and eased his tired bay horse alongside the nearest of four gaunt cowponies nosing the Oasis tie-rack. He remained in saddle, studying the ugly, unpainted structure that, lifting two stories above the street, stuck out like a sore thumb above its shabbier neighbors.

He was wondering if this was where he would find her, and trying to make up his mind if he'd stay. He was recalling Aunt Minet's last words, and they had a compelling quality:

"Try to understand and forgive her, Steve. Promise!"

He dismounted finally, dropped the bay's reins over the rack and ducked under it, stepping lightly up to the raised plank walk. He had been brought up with a carnival troup, and half his life had been spent on the high wire, so he carried his body with the sureness of a trained athlete.

HE WAS conscious of two things as he pushed through the slatted doors. One was the soft tinkling of a piano. The other was a man's deep, almost belligerent voice.

"—even the Rangers wouldn't be fools enough to send one man and—"

The voice broke off as Steve entered, and he was conscious of a sudden silence that spread swiftly and coldly through that big room. He stopped just inside the swinging doors, letting his eyes become adjusted to the lesser light before moving on.

The Oasis was bigger than he had expected it to be. A lanky man was draped in solitary seclusion over the far end of the mahogany bar, nursing a drink in morose silence. He had a bandaged hand, and all the earmarks of being a gunslinger. The faro tables and other gambling paraphernalia were not in use at this hour, but under an open balcony that looked down over the center of the big hall four men were seated around a card table.

Steve's glance moved past them to the small stage that took up the rear wall. A woman was bent over the keys of a box piano. Since she was wearing a wide, flower-trimmed hat and a gray duster, obviously she had just come in from outside.

Her music was dreamy, sentimental. It flowed through that still room like oil, easing the tension. She did not look around, and Steve, frowning, could see only her back and her gray-shot hair coiled in a bun on her neck.

He walked to the bar. The solitary drinker gave him an unfriendly scowl. The bartender, a small, turkey-necked man with sharp, coal black eyes parted by a blade of a nose, slid along the counter and faced him.

"Yup?" The barkeep almost bit the word in half.

"Beer."

The man drew a glass and placed it on the counter. His eyes looked Steve over. "First stranger I've seen in a week," he commented. "Staying?"

"Depends."

The bartender frowned. "Vulcan's at the end of the Gold Strip," he pointed out. "Strangers either stay, or head back. You got business in town?"

Steve pushed his empty glass toward the man. "I'll take a refill," he said levelly.

The bartender clammed up. He drew another, shoved it in front of the customer and went off in a huff.

Steve drank slowly. He turned on his elbow and took in the players at the card table. Then he glanced toward the woman. She was still running her fingers along the piano keys. Somehow she turned Steve's thoughts to the bitter girl from whom he had asked directions.

He swung back to his drink and his idle glance was attracted to the bar mirror where someone had soaped:

ODDS 5—1 STAGE DOESN'T MAKE IT

The bartender caught his frown and shuffled back. "You a gambling man?"

"Might be," Steve answered. "The odds are interesting."

The barman grinned. "Twenty will get you one hundred—if the stage shows up tonight."

Steve said levelly, "You sound like it's a sure thing."

The barman shrugged. "Hell, what do you think of a damn fool who thinks he can run a stage line across that desert and through the Vulcans. That's Cordele's territory out there!"

Steve considered this. He could understand now the reason for the girl's bitterness. He had seen the sign on the door of the office before which she had stood. The man who had entered it must have been her father.

"I'd think a fool like that is worth backing," he said to the barkeep, reached inside his pocket and tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the counter.

The man chuckled as he slid the gold coin into a cigar box. "The next one's on the house," he offered generously.

He drew the beer and Steve said, "I'm looking for a woman named Nora Westerly."

The barman kept his eyes on the glass. "Your wife?"

"My mother."

THE bartender drew his stick across the top of the glass and set it up before Steve. "Never heard the name before," he said.

Steve looked him squarely in the eyes, and he thought the man either was a barefaced liar, or that Aunt Minet had been wrong.

He was toying with his free beer when one of the card players got up and headed for the bar. But he couldn't know—then—that the man was Monk Brule, Tain's bouncer. Monk was a town man, a rough and burly man, and he had licked every man who had ever walked into the Oasis looking for a fight. But his intentions now were peaceful as he headed for the bar.

He wore a gray bowler hat and a white, blue-striped shirt rolled up to his elbows. Gaudy green armbands were tight over heavy biceps. He was chewing on a cigar jutting from a face that had seen much punishment. His nose had been flattened so often it was spread across the middle third of his wide features. His left ear was a neat cauliflower.

He came up in time to place his palm over the silver dollar Steve was dropping on the counter. He pushed it back.

"Drinks are on the house this afternoon, kid."

Steve looked him over. "Nice custom," he admitted. He was wondering what this man wanted.

"I'm Monk Brule," the burly man said. "I keep the peace around here."

"I'm a peaceful man," Steve said shortly. He turned back to his beer.

Monk frowned. He reached out and took Steve's beer away and said heavy-handedly, "Ray, give the kid a man's drink. Rye whisky!"

Steve turned slowly. His face showed no change. But his right hand came up fast. He jammed his palm against Monk's

cigar, squashing it into the man's meaty face.

CHAPTER III

Stranger in Town

THERE was a moment of stunned, surprised silence. Then the lanky man at the far end of the bar snickered.

Monk spat out shreds of tobacco. He had not expected trouble, and in his own way he had tried to be friendly. The snicker from the end of the bar was like a match to the gunpowder of his temper.

He swung savagely. The young man in front of him didn't seem to move, but Monk missed his face by two inches, and his follow-through brought him up heavily against the bar. He bounced off and swung again. He missed both times.

He was off-balance when the young fellow's boot, colliding with his backside, sent him sprawling.

The music had stopped now and the woman had turned to face the commotion. The light was poor and Steve couldn't see her face clearly. He sensed she was not young.

Monk scrambled to his feet. He shuffled toward Steve, cautious now, angry clear through.

"Fast, eh?" he sneered. "Fast and tricky."

Steve hit him first, a wicked blow that smashed Monk's lips, started blood down his chin. Monk lowered his head and jammed his shoulder against the lighter man, bulling him against the bar, working his fists to the hard body. He got in several punishing blows before he felt himself whirled around. He lifted his head and a rock-hard fist banged him in the left eye. Another he didn't see chopped the side of his thick neck. He dropped to his knees.

Steve Westerly got his back against the bar and waited. His ribs ached, but he breathed easily.

Monk was slow getting to his feet.

The sound of a man running along the plankwalk seeped into the stillness. Then the batwings parted violently and a short, stocky man who barged in skidded to a stop. He looked toward the bar, yelled:

"Where's Tain? The stage's coming in and—"

He stopped, his jaw hanging, staring at the scene in front of the bar. Monk was standing unsteadily, glaring at a young fellow before him. He took a wobbly step forward, and the bartender, inching up behind the young stranger, reached across the counter and broke a full whisky bottle on the young man's head.

The stranger dropped. The bartender leaned over the counter to stare down at the limp figure. "Damn waste of likker," he mumbled. "But I didn't have time to get my bung starter."

The stocky man in the doorway growled, "What in hell's going on?"

Monk ignored him. He turned as a voice barked a question from the balcony, and this time muttered an answer:

"Some cocky young rooster looking for trouble, Tain."

He wiped blood from his face with a handkerchief as he went to meet the man coming downstairs.

Ned Tain was a slim, dapper man in his mid-thirties. He had a long face, the narrowness of which was accentuated by long dark burnsides. He was never seen angry, he seldom raised his voice. Yet men had learned to step wide of this soft-spoken gambler who ran the Oasis.

The card players, as well as the solitary drinker, gunslinger or not, had crowded toward the door. Only the bartender remained—and the woman, who was staring at the limp figure sprawled before the brass rail.

Monk and Tain joined the others as the men reached the saloon steps outside.

The Travers stage came by, tired horses kicking up dust that hung like a gauzy filter against the red rays of the sun. A stranger was handling the reins—a tall, wide-shouldered man in black. A magnificent golden sorrel trotted easily

alongside the old coach.

The man with the bandaged hand swore.

Tain looked at him.

"Who's he?" he asked coldly.

THE gunslinger shook his head. "There was only one man at the station," he said flatly. "And a dog. We killed him. The dog got his teeth in my gun hand and Rike near shot me trying to get him. The dog got away."

He took a slow, deliberate breath, his eyes still following the stage until it turned at the corner.

He said, "I told you all that, Ned. We waited inside until the stage drove up. I got the gun guard, Rike plugged the driver. Drake sat around on his hands. We didn't need him along."

Tain said softly, "Cordele isn't going to like this. I don't know what he's got against Travers, but he wants to break him."

The killer with the bandaged hand said sullenly, "I only take orders, Ned. I'm not paid to think."

They turned then, and both went back inside.

Ray Amens, the bartender, was talking to Madge Tucker. They heard him saying, "Came in here asking for a woman named Nora Westerly." He stopped as Tain and the gunman came up.

No one noticed that Madge seemed to be suffering from shock. She stepped quickly to a chair and sank into it, her face gray.

The bartender nudged Steve with his toe. "What do we do with this?" he asked callously.

"Drag him out to the alley," Tain ordered. "If he's what he seems, just a damn fool kid, he'll head back to Ore City soon as he can sit saddle again. If he isn't—" He turned and looked at Monk who snarled grimly:

"We'll bury him. . . . "

Jim Hatfield drove the old Concord down Vulcan's Main Street, his eyes searching for sign of the transportation office. The big grays were about ready to drop. He swung past a big structure in the middle of the block, conscious that a half-dozen men were crowding through the batwings, staring after him. His glance flicked up to the sign over the door:

TAIN'S OASIS

He filed it in his head.

A heavy wagon temporarily blocked his path at the intersection, and his eye caught the sign nailed over the door of a building midway down the block on his right. He turned the stage toward it.

A girl was standing on the plank walk in front of the transportation office. A slim, rounded figure that struck a chord in the tall, grim Ranger, reminding him of another girl and another time.

Remorselessly he shut his mind to speculation.

Men were staring at the stage as though its arrival had not been expected. The girl had gone rigid, surprise in her eyes. Hatfield swung the grays around in a tight turn and brought them up in front of the office. He nudged his hat and smiled at the girl.

"I reckon this is the end of the line, miss?"

She didn't answer him. She turned away, calling, her voice breaking sharply:

"Dad! It's the stage!"

Corby Travers was already hurrying through the doorway. He hobbled to the edge of the plank walk and looked up at the Ranger, relief and bewilderment a curious mixture in his eyes.

Hatfield said grimly, "Somebody better get a doc here. In a hurry!" He jumped down off the seat and jerked open the coach door. "Your driver's inside. With a bullet in him!"

Travers took one look, then said to Melody, "Your legs are better than mine. Fetch Doc Hames."

Melody cast a frightened glance at her father, at the tall, black-garbed stranger. Then she began running up the street.

He lifted the woman up in his arms—and then felt a gun jabbing into his back

Travers Corby muttered, "That's Tab all right. Where's George? What happened?"

Hatfield said brusquely, "Got a cot inside there?" At Travers' nod, he added, "I'll bring him in. George's dead. I buried him."

"Buried who?" a voice behind them asked bluntly.

HATFIELD looked up, and Corby Travers growled, "Evening, Marshal Tensel." He stepped back as a big, rawboned man moved to the stage.

Pete Tensel wore a marshal's badge and two guns thonged down low. Someone had once mentioned that he looked like Wild Bill Hickok, and Pete had dressed the part ever since. He was big and hard, and his buckskin shirt fitted snug across his shoulders. He kept his blond mustache carefully trimmed, but his hair was long and shaggy on his neck.

"Buried who?" he repeated, scowling.

Travers said angrily, "This is a hell of a time to ask questions, Tensel! Wait till later!"

Hatfield shrugged and reached inside for

the wounded driver. The marshal stepped aside as the man was brought out.

Corby said quickly, "The bunk's in the back room inside."

The Ranger followed him inside, through the front office, to a rear room. There were two cots in this small cubby-hole, a pot-bellied stove, and a couple of wooden boxes serving as trunks.

"Tab bunked here," Travers explained fretfully. "George, too, sometimes."

He watched Hatfield ease the wounded man down on the blankets. Tab groaned. His eyes flickered, but they didn't focus on anyone.

The Ranger told Travers, "There were two dead men at your way station. One of them I took to be the gun guard. The other must have been your station keeper." He told how he had found the stage, but said nothing about his reasons for having been there.

Corby Travers seemed crushed by the news. "Thanks, stranger," he said.

His daughter came in, then, followed by a tall, red-faced man carrying a black bag. Doc Hames was a competent medico, but his manner was brusque. He pushed past the men and bent over Tab.

"Get me a pan of water," he ordered, without looking up. He began to cut the shirt away from the ugly hole in Tab's chest.

Jim Hatfield headed for the door. He had brought the stage in, which was what any man might have done, but he wanted no part of the stage line's troubles.

Marshal Pete Tensel tapped him on the shoulder. "Just a minute!" he said authoritatively. "Who in hell are you? And what were you doing out at Apache, fifteen miles from the nearest traveled road?"

Hatfield looked him up and down with a cold eye. "That's a town marshal's badge you're wearing," he answered meagerly. "Not a sheriff's star. What I was doing out there is my business. And if you had asked me pleasant-like, what my name was, I might have told you."

The lawman stiffened. He was a vain man, and he could feel the girl's eyes on him, watching.

"You're in town now," he reminded harshly.

"So I am," Hatfield said softly. He looked the marshal in the eye. "You aim to make something of it?"

He had judged Pete Tensel rightly. The man backed down from the cold threat of violence. A red flush stained his neck as he sought his way out behind sudden bluster.

"You make a wrong move while in town, feller, and I will! I've handled craggier customers than—"

Jim Hatfield shrugged, and walked out through the darkening office to the plank walk, beside the stage. A crowd had collected around the Concord, peering curiously inside. Men made way for him as he strode to the edge of the walk and whistled for Goldy.

The big sorrel came alongside and he swung into saddle. The crowd eyed the tall, hard man as he swung away, headed for the intersection.

The sun had gone down and now there was a short interval of twilight, the hesitation between day and night. The Ranger was tired, and he knew Goldy could stand a rest also. He had pushed the big stallion hard during the last three days, since leaving the railroad at Yellow Junction.

REACHING the intersection, he had a moment of hesitation as he remembered the anonymous note McDowell had received. Easing Goldy to the walk, he asked a question of a passing miner.

"The Red Sand Hotel?" The man grinned. "The Preacher's place, you mean." He pointed. "Next corner—adobe building with stables in the rear."

When the Ranger rode up to the hotel, someone was on the stoop, hanging a lantern on the hook by the door. The man who turned and eyed the rider as the Ranger stepped out of saddle was so tall he all but loomed over the tall Hatfield—a cadaverous, hollow-cheeked man he was, with bushy gray brows and deep-set black eyes. He rubbed his hands to-

gether, as though they were cold, and craned his head, looking past the Ranger.

"Looking for somebody?" Hatfield asked drily.

"Yes," the man answered. He had a deep, sonorous voice. "An honest man in this town."

Hatfield chuckled. "I'm just looking for a room and board for my cayuse, Diogenes."

"The name's Messlinger," the tall man said. "Joe Messlinger. But most people call me the Preacher." A small smile crinkled his lips. "Didn't think I'd ever hear the words of classical reference in this misbegotten town, stranger. Light. I'll have a boy look after your horse." He held the lantern high and examined the sorrel. "A likely looking cayuse, a mighty fine animal. Does he read Greek history, too?"

"Goldy's an Epicurean," Jim Hatfield said, straight-faced.

"He looks it," the Preacher snorted. He rehung the lantern and yelled through the doorway. "Manuel! *Muy pronto!*"

A small, quick-eyed youngster appeared. The Preacher gave orders and the boy started down the stairs for Goldy. The sorrel shied away, snorting suspiciously. Hatfield slid his hand along the dusty neck.

"Go with him, Goldy. He's all right."

Manuel reached up to rub the sorrel's nose. "*Muy grande*," he murmured, "*Venga, amigo.*"

Goldy nudged the boy's shoulder and the *muchacho* laughed. Hatfield relaxed. Something about this brown-skinned boy assured him Goldy would be well taken care of.

CHAPTER IV

"It Was a Pleasure, Son"

JIM HATFIELD followed the Preacher into the dimly lighted lobby. A worn, faded carpet led from the door to the desk and to the rooms upstairs. There was an air of shabby neatness about the place that reminded Hatfield rather incongruously of a spinster.

The Preacher went behind the counter and turned the book around. When the Ranger signed "B. Brown," the hotel man's eyes widened slightly. He took a key from the rack behind him.

"Two-twelve," he said. "Left at the head of the stairs."

Hatfield picked up the key.

"Bar or dining room?" the Preacher asked.

Hatfield looked at the man. The Preacher said accusingly, "Customers are always looking for one or the other. Don't have either in the hotel. You'll get good food in the Blue Lunchroom across the street. Bars"—he made a wry face—"you can take your pick up and down any street. Just one suggestion, though. Stay out of Tain's Oasis."

Hatfield nodded. "I'll remember," he said gravely.

He went up to his room and found a pitcher of water on the small table by the iron-framed bed. He washed, but decided to wait and shave in the morning. He was hungry, and he hadn't seen this town in three years. Vulcan had been only a few shacks around a couple of mining claims when he had first known it.

He came downstairs and walked out into the street, crossing to the Blue Lunchroom recommended by the Preacher. He ate unhurriedly, trying not to think of a ten-year-old boy being held in Cordele's desert hideout. Or that he had a week to work in, with his only lead an anonymous note. More than likely that would prove to be a trap—a method of tipping Cordele off that a Ranger was in town.

That possibility was annoying. But it was too late to change things. Hatfield had come to Vulcan because of that note, and because an idea had taken root during the three days he had ridden the train to Yellow Junction. He didn't have a chance of tracking Cordele down in the next seven days. But he could plan for Cor-

dele to hunt him down.

He got up, paid the counterman, and walked out. The day's heat was gone. Wind was beginning to rustle along the dusty streets.

At the intersection he swung right, and saw that Tain's Oasis was coming to life. Men were shouldering inside through the batwings as he started up the plank walk. A piano was making a racket inside, and he could hear the rough laughter of a sizable crowd as he drew near.

A dark alleyway made a break in the plank walk between the saloon and the dark building next to it. Hatfield was stepping down into it when a figure loomed up out of the shadows. The man collided with Hatfield, jerked back, and swung at the Ranger's face.

The Lone Wolf's palm stopped the blow, as though the fist had rammed into a stone wall. The reek of whisky was strong in the darkness.

Jim Hatfield whirled his attacker around, jerked him out to the half light of the road.

"Whoa, feller," he said, as the smaller man he held tried to lunge free. "Looks like you've had one too many."

"I haven't had enough! If they think Steve Westerly is—" The voice was young, hard, and belligerent.

In the faint light Hatfield made out a square-jawed young man, hatless, his brush jacket dark with spilled whisky. Blood made a streak down the side of his face.

"You going back for more?" the Ranger asked.

Steve's eyes were glittering. "You one of Tain's boys?"

Hatfield shook his head.

"Then get out of the way," Steve snapped.

He pushed past and went up the saloon steps, shouldering through the batwings with single-minded directness.

JIM HATFIELD smiled. A pulse of recklessness stirred in him. He slid his palms over the butts of his Peacemakers and followed the young hot-blood into the Oasis.

The gaming tables along the walls were getting a heavy go, and the bar was crowded. A small man with a cigar in his mouth was pounding a piano under the balcony. A few girls were circulating among the customers.

The belligerent Steve Westerly was halfway to the bar when the Ranger pushed through the doors. He noticed little things that seemingly escaped the young fellow with the blood-streaked face, things that brought a small, tight smile to Hatfield's own lips.

Three men at one of the card tables had looked up at young Steve, and one of them, a tall, black-garbed fellow with a square, hard face started to rise. His companion on his left put a hand on his arm, holding him.

Another man, standing on the lower steps of the flight leading to the balcony, took a long look at Steve, then went up the steps and disappeared into a room.

Hatfield made his way slowly to the end of the bar. All eyes were following the grim-faced Steve, and gave the Ranger no more than a cursory glance.

The turkey-necked bartender, Ray Amens, was sorting glasses on the backbar, and didn't see Steve. The high-wire expert reached the counter just as the barkeep turnd. The man's mouth gaped, but he didn't have time to make another move.

Shoving a customer out of the way, Steve Westerly went over that bar like a cat. The barman gave a short, choked yelp. Steve grabbed him by the collar and jammed him against the back shelves.

"This is for the free whiskey!" he snarled. He backhanded Amens across the mouth, and Ray yelled, "Monk!"

Steve's grin was lopsided. He lifted the man—a small man—bodily, and heaved him over the bar. Men scattered out of Steve's way as he came vaulting after Amens who was trying to scramble, on hands and knees, toward the protection of the tables. He let Amens go. Balanced on his toes, he faced that crowded gambling hall.

"Where's that big windbag who calls himself Monk Brule?" he challenged bleakly.

No one moved for a long, tense moment. Then a lanky man with a bandaged right hand who was standing next to Jim Hatfield eased slightly away from the bar and slid a Colt into his good hand.

The Ranger tapped him lightly on the shoulder. "I'd keep out of this," he suggested mildly.

The man whirled. He had his Colt half out of holster, and didn't see the fist that exploded against his jaw. He sagged in the middle, slid awkwardly down between the brass rail and the bar.

"Tch, tch," Hatfield muttered, shaking his head at the men who turned to look. "Must have had one too many."

A door opened upstairs and three men came out on the smoke-dimmed balcony. The man who had gone upstairs—obviously for Monk and Tain—was scowling as he jerked a thumb at the bar.

Steve looked up and saw them. His voice carried sharply. "You coming down here, Monk—or do I come up after you?"

Monk's face darkened. He started to move away from Tain, but the tall gambler laid a hand on his arm, holding him. He nodded slightly to someone down in the gambling hall. A tall, black-garbed gunman at a card table got to his feet. He was a hard-faced man of about thirty, and he wore two guns, thonged low.

"You're making too much noise, kid," he said to Steve thinly. "If you're looking for a fight that bad, I'm your man. Name's Rike—Bill Rike."

Steve turned his head to appraise this man. A slight chill worked its way down his spine. He had come in spoiling for a

A TALL TEXAS TALE

WASTED WORDS

THE drouth last summer reminded me of when me and Buck Swartz and Polecat Riddel was running a little ranch over in the Panhandle country. Texas men are doers, not talkers, and we'd go for months without a word being spoke.

Polecat was the quietest of all and we hadn't heard him speak for so long we'd forgot how he sounded. He went to a dentist once and when the Doc pried his mouth open three moths flew out.

We was having a drouth and it got so danged dry it took all three of us to raise enough spit to attach a stamp to a letter. When a strong wind blowed it was not unusual for a rancher to stand on his porch and say: "Well, there goes my ranch headed for Colorado."

One day Buck looks at the sky and says, "It's gonna rain."

I looks up and says, "It ain't."

Not another word was spoke for six months, and then one day Buck says, "It IS gonna rain."

"It ain't," I says.

No word was spoke for six months more, and then Buck and me had another conversation about rain just like the other two.

At that Polecat went in the house and come out with his suitcase.

"What goes?" asked Buck.

"Me," says Polecat. "They's too much arguing around here for a body to stand it."

—W. L. Hudson

fight. But he knew he couldn't handle this tall, cold-eyed gunman. Not with guns. And that was what this hardcase was angling for.

RIKE sneered, "Maybe you need a little persuading, son. You been talking tough, and you got a gun on your hip to prove you are."

Hatfield stepped away from the bar. "You've got two guns," he cut in mildly. "And I don't need any persuading a-tall."

Rike turned. Slowly. "Kind of figured there'd be a sleeper with the kid," he growled. "And I don't aim to do any persuading."

He was moving away from the table, talking as he stabbed down for his guns.

Jim Hatfield's single shot doubled him up, sent him sprawling between the tables. His two companions fell out of their chairs in their hurry to get out of bullet range. They came to their feet, sullen and set-lipped, staring at the twin guns in the Ranger's hands.

He said to Steve pleasantly, "I reckon we won't have any more interference, son. Go ahead—it's your show."

Steve licked dry lips. He didn't know who this tall stranger was, but he realized how close his foolhardiness had brought him to sudden death. Then his anger came back, and he started across the hall for the balcony stairs.

No one else moved. Except Monk Brule, who suddenly shook off Tain's detaining hand and came down to meet the grim-faced Steve.

They met at the foot of the stairs. It was a short, brutal fight with an audience kept sullenly inactive by the threat of the Lone Wolf's guns.

It took Steve ten slogging violent minutes to chop Monk into a bloody, reeling figure. To batter the burly man to his knees, finally to the floor.

Steve stood over him, his anger spent, his breath coming in great, ragged gusts. The bruises on his ribs didn't show, but the cut on his swelling lips made a thin red streak down his chin. He had a lump over his right eye which would develop into a beautiful shiner by morning.

He turned slowly, searching out the bartender among those watching men.

"I reckon I won a bet," he reminded the man bleakly. "I'll take the hundred dollars now!"

The bartender scurried around the counter, reached inside the cigar box and counted out gold pieces. He put them on the bar.

Steve pocketed the money. He was in no hurry. He had a clean glass set up before him and poured himself a generous slug from a bottle on the bar. "I'm taking that man's drink, too," he said. "On the house."

He drank it neat. Then, moving away from the counter, he found his hat and put it on. He tipped it forward, arrogantly, over his swelling eye. He nodded coolly to Jim Hatfield.

"Thanks for keeping these bums off my back," he said.

Hatfield grinned appreciatively. "It was a pleasure, son."

Steve walked out. The batwings creaked softly in the unnatural silence. Hatfield waited a moment, gauging the temper of this crowd, then followed the youngster, walking slowly to the doors. No man moved.

Out in the night, he felt the rising wind rake his face with gritty fingers. The kid was lost somewhere in the darkness.

The Lone Wolf shrugged, holstered his Colts, and headed up the street.

Inside the Oasis, shocked silence lingered for a few moments after the Ranger's departure. Then several men headed for the doors. Tain's voice stopped them. He gave sharp orders, and went back into his office.

He waited there as men helped the dazed Monk and the equally wobbly man with the bandaged hand—Slim Klebb, they called him—inside. Rike's body was carried to another room, to await the undertaker.

Tain closed his office door. He eyed Monk who slumped in a chair, palming his bruised face. "You look like hell!" he

rubbed it in. "A kid half your size made you look like a monkey tonight!"

The bouncer said nothing. He kept looking down at the floor between his feet.

KLEBB asked dully, "What happened? What happened to Rike?"

Tain's voice dripped with contempt. "Rike's dead," he snapped. "The big hombre who drove the stage into town killed him." He laughed thinly. "Hell, Rike didn't even come close!"

Klebb shook his head. His eyes were still glazed.

"Five of you," Tain sneered. "Big grown men. Four of you claiming to be craggy gunhands. And two strangers, one of them just a kid, come in here and take over. Right here, in the Oasis! Wait until Cordele hears this!"

Klebb muttered, "Maybe Cordele ought to hear. If that big feller killed Rike in a shoot-out, he's way out of my class." His voice rose defensively. "And out of the class of anybody here!" He looked up into Tain's hard face. "Ned, I think this is a job for Questra."

The gambler shook his head. "I don't want that damn killer in town here unless we have to have him." He turned to the stumpy man who had come upstairs to warn him. "Jules, it's your job. Get the big feller first. Find out where he's staying. Then—you know. The old trick."

Jules nodded.

CHAPTER V

A Mighty Old Trick

RISING WIND prowled through the streets of Vulcan. It was blowing sand off the desert and the air was gritty. Even the splashes of light on the walk were a yellow haze.

The Preacher was sitting behind his counter, reading a week-old copy of the Houston paper when Jim Hatfield walked into the Red Sand Hotel. The proprietor uncoiled his long legs, jabbed a finger at a story head on the front page.

"See where Cordele is supposed to have kidnapped the Governor's son," he said. "Wonder if that's on the level?"

Hatfield shrugged. "It's in the paper, isn't it?"

The Preacher looked at him shrewdly. "You look almighty pleased about something," he said pettishly. "You drunk?"

The Ranger shook his head. "Must be the night air," he said.

He went upstairs, grinning, and the Preacher looked after him wrathfully. He muttered, "I don't know who you are, big fella, but you came into town driving Corby's stage, when everybody figured the stage would never make it. A big gazabo out of nowhere, with an educated background, and a pair of guns that looked like they have been used a lot."

Boots scuffed across his threshold, tapped softly on his worn carpet. A man came to the desk and the light from the overhead lamp fell across a battered young face that somehow seemed cheerful despite the blood and bruises.

The Preacher's jaw dropped.

Steve Westerly said drily, "The blood washes off, Pop. And if you're wondering about the whisky smell, I always wash my hair in it before going to bed."

The Preacher shook his head. He turned the register around and watched the young fellow sign, "Steve Westerly." He looked up again, noting Steve's swelling right eye.

"Two dollars," he said aimlessly, and added hopefully, "Cheaper by the week."

"One night'll be enough in this flea-bitten burg," Steve growled. "I'll be leaving in the morning." He took out a gold piece and dropped it on the book. "I've got a bay horse outside that needs feed and a place out of this cussed wind."

"Dollar extra," the Preacher said.

He was becoming irritated at this young man's cheerfulness. It was going to be a hell of a night, the way the wind was blowing, and this stranger with the bruised face had no right to be enjoying it.

He made change, watched Steve pocket it, and handed him a key.

"Two-fifteen. Turn right at the head of the stairs."

He watched the young fellow go whistling upstairs. Then he looked again at the name on the register. Steve Westerly.

"I wonder—" He shook the thought from his head.

Suddenly restless, he came from behind the counter and walked to the back room.

"Manuel!" he yelled. He called several times, but got no answer. "Damn lazy *muchacho,*" he muttered.

He went outside and led the bay horse that was tied to the rack down to the barn and began stripping the saddle from the animal. He got the patient bay into a stall and walked back into the hotel. Manuel would get a kick in the pants for taking off without permission.

Minutes later when Manuel's brown face appeared in the doorway, he came lightfooted to the desk, the Preacher reached behind him for a long slender switch.

"No, no!" the boy protested. "I have news."

The Preacher waited, scowling.

"I took a *pasado,* after I get through with Meester Brown's *gran caballo,*" the boy said. His eyes were round and dark. "By chance, I follow heem to the Blue Lunchroom. Then—" he paused. "Then Meester Brown go to the Oasis."

The Preacher's upraised arm slackened. "Huh?"

Manuel nodded vigorously. "I watched, through the doors. The beeg Señor Brown, he shoot Rike. Then he make everyone watch, while the younger one beat up that *mal hombre,* Monk Brule. *Si.*"

THE PREACHER listened with gaping mouth as Manuel, aided by a vivid imagination, recounted what he had seen through the slatted doors of the Oasis. At the end Manuel crossed himself.

"I swear it. It is as I have said. The beeg señor—"

The Preacher cut him off. "All right—all right. Get on out to the stables. There's a bay horse in a stall. Give him a rubdown and feed." He raised the switch. "And keep off the streets after dark, or—"

The boy scurried through the back door.

The Preacher looked up at the stairs. He thought, So you walk into Tain's, shoot Rike, and make the rest of that craggy crowd stand around while this cocky kid gives Monk a licking? Maybe you don't know what you were bucking, in which case you'll be a lot healthier if you leave town by sunup. But if you're staying, Vulcan's been needing a man like you for a long time.

Then he thought of Cordele, and of Cordele's chief gunman, the desert lobo, Questra. "If you last," he muttered.

He walked to the front door again, opened it. The wind was howling through the town. His irritation returned. Again he looked up the dim stairs.

"If you last," he repeated grimly.

Upstairs in his room Jim Hatfield sat on the iron bed and ran his fingers through his crisp black hair. He had stirred up the hornet's nest that was Tain's Oasis, and maybe he'd made it just that much harder to get a lead on Cordele.

He went to the window and listened to the rapping of the grit against the panes, wondering briefly if the Winterlee boy was still alive. Link Cordele's execution was set for next Tuesday. He had six days to find Jerome Cordele's hideout. He tried to put the governor's worried face out of his mind.

Never before had he had so little to go on—and so little time!

He thought again of the note McDowell had received. If it was a trap, he'd find out tonight. If it wasn't, it might be the break he needed.

He took off his boots and put them beside the bed. His gunbelts and holsters were draped from a head bedpost. He hung his long black coat and flat-crowned hat on a hook by the dresser and went to bed.

He was tired, yet strangely restless. He thought of the girl and the man who had been waiting for the stage to come in—and the plan that had been vague in his mind started to take shape. It was still in the formative stage when he fell asleep.

He woke instantly at the knocking, every faculty alert, but knew he had been asleep a long time. It was still dark, and the windstorm had not lessened. He could hear the slither and patter of grit against the window. Some of it filtered through chinks around the framing and made soft noises, like mice scurrying across the floor.

The knocking was repeated.

The Lone Wolf Ranger swung his legs to the floor and reached for one of his Colts. The bed creaked as his weight shifted, and whoever was standing outside in the hall heard it. The knocking stopped.

Hatfield frowned. It could be the man who had written that note to Captain McDowell. And yet—

The old floor boards creaked under his stocking feet as he walked to the door. "Who is it?" he asked sharply.

He got no answer. Whoever was standing out in the dark hallway either was too scared to talk, or he was waiting for the Ranger's next move.

Hatfield was reaching for the knob, his gun balanced in his hand, when he remembered an old trick. A bleak smile curled his lips. Silently he eased his body against the wall and rattled the knob with his left hand.

A GUN blasted twice. The heavy slugs tore twin gashes in the door panel six inches above the knob—just the right height to hit a man in the solar plexus.

The next second Hatfield had yanked the door open. A short, stocky man was a dark figure in the dim hallway. He had just started to run for the head of the stairs, and turned his head in a quick jerk of surprise. Then the Ranger's Colt came down, denting his hat and head.

Hatfield caught him as he slumped, and dragged him inside the room.

The heavy reports seemed to linger in the sleeping quiet of the hotel. Then Hatfield heard beds creak as awakened occupants sat up, trying to decide whether to investigate the shooting or mind their own business.

Footsteps came creaking determinedly up the stairs and Jim Hatfield, glancing quickly around the dark room, decided to prop the unconscious man in the corner behind the door. He didn't light his lamp.

A yellow glow seeped into the hallway, showed under the closed door.

The Preacher's sleepy, irritated voice called, "What in hell's going on up here? Who's the fool shooting off his Colt?"

Hatfield opened his door, Colt still in his right hand. He scratched his head, his eyes round and innocent, as he looked at the gashes in his door panel.

The Preacher looked comical coming down the hallway. He was holding a lamp in his left hand, a huge Army Colt in his other. His long bony legs were bare under his red flannel nightshirt.

"I was cleaning my Colt," Hatfield apologized, "and the damn thing went off."

The Preacher choked, "At three in the morning? Good gawd!"

Hatfield shrugged. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd do something." He grinned. "Sometimes cleaning a Colt helps my insomnia."

"You don't look like an insomniac," the hotelman snapped. "And you don't look like the kind who ain't got the sense of a muley jackass." He looked around as a lean figure loomed up in the hallway. "All right, all right," he growled. "No need of everybody congregating here just because some damn fool decides to clean his gun at this hour in the morning!"

Steve Westerly eyed the ragged holes in the door, shifted his attention to the Ranger's bland face.

"I room just down the hall," he said, for Hatfield's benefit. "And I can't sleep, either. Now ain't that a hell of a coincidence?"

The Preacher snorted. "Two damn fools!" he snapped. "Well, if you both

are going to stay up, *I'm* going back to bed! Insomniacs!" he growled, bare feet plopping on the floor boards. "Hell!"

Doors closed along the hall as he passed, and muttering roomers went back to bed.

Steve Westerly said softly to Hatfield, "The old boy's eyesight is bad. But mine isn't. Those holes were made by someone standing on this side of the door!"

"You're an observant cuss." Hatfield grinned. He liked this youngster with the bruised face. He stepped back into the dark room. "Maybe you'd like to see the cause of all the commotion."

Steve hesitated. Hatfield turned his back on him and walked to the window. He pulled the shade down to the sill, then went to the lamp on the small table. He scraped a match and touched it to the wick. He kept the light turned down.

Steve stepped inside and closed the door.

Hatfield pointed out the stocky man slumped against the wall. "Reckon Tain got peeved over the little shindig we held at his place tonight. Sent one of his men to make sure it wouldn't happen again."

Steve licked his lips. "How'd he know how to find your room?"

The Ranger shrugged. "He could have checked the register downstairs. My room number is beside my name. Brown," he added grimly.

Then he frowned as a thought occurred to him. Signing the register, he had noticed that he was the first transit customer the Preacher had had in two weeks. That would have made this stocky man's job easy—just locate the man who registered today. But this young fellow, Steve, obviously had come in after him.

"He might have been looking for you," he said, "and seeing we're both strangers in town, he'd have to guess."

STEVE shook his head. "They knew, in Tain's, that my name is Westerly—Steve Westerly." He made a small gesture with his shoulders, like a tired boy after a hard day. "I guess they were after you all right." He walked to the bed and sat down, watching the big man. "Sorry I got you into this trouble."

"I stuck my nose in because I wanted to," the Ranger reminded. "I'm not sorry." He smiled. "What started the fuss, son?"

Steve took a breath. "Maybe it'll make more sense if I start back a couple of weeks, Brown. I was raised by my aunt and uncle since I can remember. Didn't even know they weren't my real parents until I was ten, then they told me. Aunt and Uncle Minet were carnival people—high wire performers. I grew up on the wire."

He smiled self consciously. "We were a traveling troup. I liked the life. But two weeks ago there was an accident. We worked without nets. When the wire broke it killed them both. My aunt died in the hospital, two hours after my uncle did. Before she died she told me where to find my mother."

He got off the bed and walked to the window.

Jim Hatfield asked gently, "Here in Vulcan?"

"In Tain's!"

Steve turned then, his eyes hard. "But no one in the Oasis seemed to know Nora Westerly. Or else they were lying their heads off."

He told the Ranger then what had happened in the Oasis. He ended harshly, "I came to in the alley. And I could think of only one thing—to get back in there and finish the job I'd started."

Hatfield nodded. 'You did a pretty good job."

Steve suddenly grinned. "What you going to do with him?" he wanted to know.

The Ranger rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Tain's hardcases seem to have quite a reputation around here. Now if we—"

As he outlined his plans for the stocky man briefly, Steve's jaw dropped at the sheer audacity of it. Then he began to chuckle. He was laughing weakly, tears in his eyes, as Jim Hatfield blew out the light.

CHAPTER VI

New Sign for the Oasis

MANUEL, a light sleeper, was awakened by movement in the stable below him. He wriggled out of his straw bed and crawled noiselessly to the opening in the loft and looked down the ladder. It was too dark to make out details, but it seemed to him that two men were wrapping an old horse blanket around something that didn't move. Finally one of them heaved the bundle to his shoulder, and both went out.

Manuel hesitated, remembering the Preacher's warning about going out. Then the pull of excitement and curiosity overcame caution. Barefooted, he crept down the ladder and slipped noiselessly out of the barn.

He had no difficulty following the two men. The streets were deserted—a heavy, pre-dawn blackness lay like a pall over Vulcan. The wind had died down.

The shadows paused in front of the Oasis' dark bulk. From a doorway, half a block behind, Manuel's widening eyes saw the smaller of the two men being hoisted to the heavy beam that jutted out over the walk, and from which the Oasis sign was suspended. The man up there worked swiftly. The heavy board sign was detached and lowered down to the man below who laid it aside.

The bundle was squirming now. The man holding it handled it easily, passing it up to the other man on the beam. He secured the bundle to the beam, looping several coils of rope around the thick support. Then he dropped silently beside his companion.

They stood a moment, eying their handiwork. One of them picked up the Oasis sign. The other doubled up as if suddenly seized with cramps. His muffled laughter reached Manuel.

They left then, and came back down the street. Manuel held his breath as they walked past his darkened doorway where he crouched. His eyes popped. *Diablo!* They were the same two he had watched through the Oasis doors earlier that evening!

Curiosity drew him to the squirming bundle that now replaced the Oasis sign. It was still too dark for him to make out details, but he could see now that the bundle was a trussed man. He heard a low, choked gurgle and the hanging figure jerked in violent, raging spasms.

Comprehension lighted the Mexican boy's eyes. *Madre de Dios!* Jules Monage! He crossed himself. Then he turned and scuttled back to the hotel. . . .

In the morning Jim Hatfield slept late. When he awakened he shaved leisurely, and went downstairs with the air of a man without a care in the world.

The Preacher was at the hotel desk, talking with one of his roomers. The man, highly excited, was saying:

"—hung there most of the night, like a sausage! Tain was swearing something awful when they cut Jules down. I was close enough to see Jules had a lump the size of a doorknob on his bald skull. He could hardly stand—"

He fell suddenly silent as Hatfield came up.

The Preacher looked thoughtfully at his new roomer. "If I didn't know you were upstairs last night, I'd say you probably were behind this," he accused.

"Behind what?"

"Mac here says somebody slugged one of Tain's hardcases last night. And to add insult to the whole thing, whoever done it wrapped Jules up in an old horse blanket and hung him up in place of Tain's Oasis sign over his door."

"Tch, tch," Hatfield sympathized, shaking his head.

The Preacher's eyes narrowed. "Come to think of it, I'm not so sure you were upstairs all night!"

Hatfield spread his hands. "Now why would I want to do a thing like that?" he asked innocently.

The hotelkeeper scowled. "Only a fool would monkey around with that Tain

bunch," he admitted. He looked closely at the Ranger. "But I ain't so sure you're not the kind of jasper that—" He cut himself off suddenly. "Just remembered something, Brown." He reached inside a pigeon-hole and brought out a sealed envelope. "For you."

HATFIELD took the envelope. "B. Brown" was printed neatly across the face of it.

"Found it in that pigeon-hole a few minutes ago," the Preacher said. "Somebody must have stopped by and left it while I was out to breakfast."

Hatfield slid the note into his pocket. He was turning away when the Preacher called:

"If you're coming back this morning, bring me a plug of Old Harmony?"

Hatfield nodded briefly, and went across the street to the Blue Lunchroom.

The counterman pushed a mug of coffee to him and leaned his elbows on the counter while Hatfield's ham and eggs were being cooked. The Ranger slid the envelope out of his pocket, tore it open, and read the note:

> If you're the man that Ranger Captain William McDowell sent here to find Cordele and the governor's boy, meet me at the Old Poker Hand Mine, four miles south of town. I'll be there between three and four this afternoon.

It was unsigned.

The Lone Wolf's eyes were hard as he slid the note back into his pocket. He had registered at the Red Sand Hotel as B. Brown, as per instructions—and his first caller had tried to kill him.

He had no assurance that this note would not prove to be a trap, too. . . .

The news of Jules Monage's humiliation traveled quickly through Vulcan. It reached Marshal Pete Tensel while he was sitting at his desk in his cubby-hole office. It spoiled the morning for him.

The marshal had no love for the Tain crowd, but he realized his limitations, and he had avoided any open quarrel with them. A big man, he managed to bluff his way against the ordinary run of toughs who filtered in and out of Vulcan. But, like most of the town's citizenry, he had reason to believe that the craggy element using the Oasis as their headquarters were members of Cordele's raiders, and he gave them a wide berth.

Now, within the short space of a day, two men had dared to walk into the Oasis and openly challenge Tain's hardcases, and last night someone had gone further. That someone had made Tain's whole bunch of gunsters slightly ridiculous by hanging one of them over Tain's door.

Marshal Tensel had no tie-in with the Tain bunch, but he realized the position in which these events placed him. From now on his bluster and his threats would sound hollow, and might even cost him his job.

The more he thought about the tall stranger who had come to town driving the Travers stage, the angrier he got. Finally he tossed his papers aside, found his hat, and stamped out.

Threading the early morning traffic, he caught sight of Corby Travers and his daughter standing on the walk in front of the transportation office. Corby was hammering a sign on the wall beside the door.

The marshal crossed to the plankwalk and read the "HELP WANTED" sign Corby was putting up.

As Tensel loomed over Melody she murmured, "Good morning, Marshal," but Travers kept hammering, ignoring the buckskin-clad lawman.

Pete Tensel scowled. "Still set on running that crazy stage line, eh, Corby?" he growled.

Travers didn't look around. Melody's face flushed. "If you did your job around here, Marshal—" she began.

"I don't get paid for protecting a stage line through the Vulcans!" Tensel snapped. "That's a sheriff's job. Or a job for the high-and-mighty Rangers you hear so much about—but see so little of!"

Melody shook off her father's quieting hand. "You know very well there isn't a sheriff's office within seventy miles!"

"Then let the county elect one," Tensel snapped back. "My job is to keep peace in

town—and I've been doing it."

CORBY TRAVERS turned around then. He looked old and tired in the early morning sun, but there was a stubbornness to his thin lips. "I'm not asking you for help, Marshal," he reminded coldly.

Tensel shrugged. "You don't expect to find anyone fool enough to work for you, do you?" he growled. "After what happened yesterday?"

tell you you were right about the riffraff in the Oasis."

Melody smiled tremulously. She had heard a highly colored version about what had happened in the Oasis, and she had lived with the uneasy feeling that she had been partly responsible.

"I'm sorry I was so curt yesterday," she apologized. "But Dad and I were waiting for the stage, and—" She flushed at the level regard of his gray eyes.

"It's all right," he said. "And I'm glad

"She knows all the answers. She's looking for someone who knows all the questions."

"Maybe not your kind of fools," Travers said grimly. "But—"

A young voice intruded cheerfully, "Morning, miss."

The girl looked up, as did Marshal Tensel, a scowl spreading across his wide face.

Steve Westerly was sitting the saddle of his bay. He had on a new shirt, and he had shaved and combed his hair. His right eye had a purplish ring around it, and his upper lip was swollen, but he was wearing a wide and pleasant smile.

"Just dropped by, miss," he said, "to the stage made the run.

"Not quite all right, son," Travers said bluntly. "My station man up at Apache was killed. My gun guard, too. The driver was badly wounded." He jerked a thumb at the sign he had tacked on the wall. "Right now I'm looking for a driver."

Steve shifted his attention from the girl to the sign, and in that instant he changed his plans. He had come to Vulcan at Aunt Minet's insistence—to find a mother who had abandoned him twenty years ago. He hadn't really cared whether he found her

or not, and when no one in the Oasis had seemed to know of a Nora Westerly, he had been satisfied. This morning he had saddled his bay and headed down the street, intending to leave Vulcan. But now he found himself saying:

"I drove a carnival wagon for five years, Mr. Travers. Might be I could qualify for that job."

Travers studied him, a smile beginning to ease the harshness of his lips.

Marshal Tensel snorted, "Hell! If you hire this young hell-raiser you're a bigger fool than I figured you for, Travers!"

Steve's eyes narrowed and ice rimmed the blue in his eyes. "You got reasons for your objections, lawman?"

Marshal Tensel swung around, his big hand dropping to his Colt. "I've got reasons to object to any hardcase who shows up in this town!" he snapped. "You want me to—"

Travers moved between him and Steve. "I'll do the hiring—or the turning down, Marshal!" he snapped.

"It's your business," Tensel conceded. "But if you run into more trouble because of this young rattle-brain, don't look for help from me!"

Corby Travers' grin held little amusement. "As I haven't had any help from you to date, Pete, I hardly think that'll bother me." He turned back to Steve. "Come inside, son. You're hired!"

DOWN the street Jim Hatfield came out of the lunchroom and paused to roll a smoke. Time was pressing, making him conscious of each passing moment. He looked down the dusty street to the beginning of the desert beyond, and the far loom of the Vulcans.

Out there, somewhere, Cordele had his hideout. Out there was the governor's son, held hostage in the grim game of an eye for an eye!

A man shuffled into view around the corner. A bent old man scuffing sand. Behind him plodded a small desert burro, loaded down with prospector's pick, shovel and pan. The old man walked with his eyes on the dust of the street and the burro followed patiently, without lead rope. Between the two an affinity was immediately discernible.

Jim Hatfield's glance moved casually over them. He finished his cigarette and ground the butt under his heel. He had time to kill, before the meeting with the writer of the note, and suddenly he was impatient.

He headed for the corner in long strides. Marshal Tensel, still irked by the incident at the stage office, came stomping around it at the same instant. He ran into the Ranger's hard shoulder, staggered, and his temper flared up before he had time to think.

"You blundering jackass!" he snarled. "Keep out of my way!"

He swung at Hatfield's face, missed, and lunged past. He tripped over the Ranger's leg and sprawled on his hands and knees, rolling ignominiously off the plank walk. The burro shied away, hee-hawing loudly.

The marshal swore luridly as he came up, his big hand closing down on the butt of his right-hand Colt. He got a glimpse of the tall stranger, then a shot made a sharp, racking sound.

Pete Tensel stared down at his numbed, empty hand. Meaning forced its way slowly through his shocked mind. Then he glanced up into a pair of bleak, greenish-gray eyes, and panic rammed a chunk of ice down his back.

He gulped.

"Your disposition sure needs a change," Hatfield informed him coldly. "You keep bulling around like that, Marshal, and someone'll sure change it for you. Permanent."

Tensel backed away, stumbling over his own Colt. The tall stranger nodded slightly. The marshal picked up the gun and dropped it into his holster as though it were hot to the touch.

The back of his neck was red as he walked off toward his office.

"Mighty fine shooting, mate," a cracked voice commended. "That landlubber's been needing a hole through his sails ever since he pinned that piece of nickel to his shirt."

CHAPTER VII

Cordele

A LITTLE startled, Jim Hatfield looked down at the man who had spoken in the cracked voice. Captain Bowers was standing beside his burro, his right hand resting on the animal's neck. The forefinger on that hand was missing, sheared off neatly at the knuckle—an accident of long ago.

Hatfield's glance took in the wornout boots, baggy pants, soiled shirt under a loose hanging coat. The old prospector's pale eyes met his, blinking rapidly. A vacuous smile spread across a seamed face.

"You looking for Cordele, mate?"

The question startled Hatfield. He frowned slightly. "Who?"

"Cordele." The old prospector looked wise. He cocked his head to one side and smirked. "Everybody looks for Cordele. But I know where he is, mate." His tone fell to a wheedling. "You stake me, mate. Flour and fatback, molasses—"

The Ranger said shortly, "Some other time, Pop." He wheeled away.

Too many people were willing to help him find Cordele, he reflected grimly. He didn't put any stock in the desert rat's cackling, but he had a disquieting thought that the note would prove to be a blind lead, too.

He was almost abreast of the Travers Transportation Office before he noticed it. Several men were clustered around a sign on the wall by the door. He joined them, read the notice, and went inside.

For a big man he walked softly, and for a moment no one in that office noticed him. Corby Travers was standing by the wall behind his desk, tracing with his finger along a desert map pinned to the wood. Steve Westerly was standing beside him, nodding as Travers emphasized obstacles. Corby's slender daughter, interested, was at Steve's elbow.

Hatfield coughed.

The three of them turned. Steve's frown of concentration slipped into easy smile.

"Morning," he greeted pleasantly. "Seems we keep running into one another." He added, grinning, "Not that I mind. It's been fun."

Jim Hatfield said to Travers, "I dropped by to see how your driver is."

Travers said tiredly, "He'll pull through. Doc Hames had me move Tab to his own home this morning." He smiled. "I never did thank you for bringing that stage in from Apache, Mr.—"

"Brown," Jim Hatfield said gravely.

Travers asked hopefully, "You looking for work?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Not my line." He turned his attention to Steve. "I thought you were leaving Vulcan?"

"Was." Steve's eyes met the Ranger's levelly. "Decided to stick around awhile."

Hatfield's glance dropped to the girl. It wasn't hard to find Steve's reason for staying.

Travers said, "I wish you'd change your mind, Brown. I don't know who you are, but I'm willing to take a chance on you. Any man who can outshoot Rike—" He nodded, his eyes narrowing. "I heard what happened in the Oasis. I need you. The stage will be carrying fifteen thousand in gold to Morgan tomorrow. I'll pay you what you want, if you'll ride gun guard with Steve tomorrow morning."

Steve was looking at him, and Hatfield could see the anticipation in the young fellow's eyes. But taking a job with Corby Travers' transportation line would not get the Lone Wolf nearer to finding Cordele's hideout—and time was running out.

"Sorry," he said bluntly.

He saw the sharp disappointment in Steve's eyes mirrored in those of Travers.

Melody said softly, "We still thank you, Mr. Brown, for helping us out."

He asked idly, "Know who held up the stage at Apache?"

Travers shrugged. "Must have been Cordele, or some of his riders. Though I can't understand why. This was our first trip to Morgan. We were running empty,

not even carrying a passenger. It was a trial run."

"Unless someone's out to break you," Hatfield said.

TRAVERS shook his head. "I have no competitors. At least, none that I know of." He was staring through the window, and the lines in his face were deep. "I've sunk every cent I own into this venture, Brown. If I can get this line established, it'll pay off fifty to every dollar I've put into it. If I don't—"

"I hope you make out," Hatfield cut in quietly. He nodded to Melody as he went out.

Travers sighed. "I may be wrong," he said bleakly. "But I would have rested easy tomorrow, knowing he was riding up there beside you, Steve."

The young man nodded. "So would I. . . ."

In the Oasis, down the street, Ned Tain walked slowly upstairs to his office. The place was deserted, except for the bartender, Ray Amens who was downstairs cleaning up. It would be hours before the house started doing any real business.

On the landing the gambler-owner of the Oasis paused to light a cigarette. He was a man who had built his life around hunches, and he was thinking now that it was time to sell out, move from Vulcan. The feeling had been born in him the moment he had seen Bill Rike, a man who had had few peers with a Colt, stagger and fall under the blazing gun of a tall, broad-shouldered stranger. Something about that man nagged at Tain, something familiar, and yet he could not place it.

He opened the door of his room. And stopped. The cigarette between his lips jerked, his eyes went wary.

The man sitting behind his desk said calmly, "Come in. Shut the door behind you. Lock it."

Tain did as instructed. Then he faced the man who was his boss, a man he saw only rarely. Cordele!

The outlaw chief was a tall man, lean and wiry. He was wearing a gray suit, and there was something dapper about him as he sat back, tapping the desk top with his gloved fingers. But the apparent softness in him was deceiving, for it was the softness of a jungle cat, claws sheathed and sunning itself.

A black mask covered his eyes and his nose. Tain had never seen him without this covering. Below that mask the man's lips were thin and pitiless.

"What happened?" he asked softly. Tain's private bottle of bourbon was on the desk, some whisky was still in the glass the man held.

Tain stood rigid, resenting Cordele's taking over his office, but hiding it. He said stiffly, "I sent Rike, Slim, and Jules out to stop the stage, like you wanted. They—"

"I know what happened at Apache," the outlaw boss interrupted coldly. "I want to know what happened yesterday. And what happened to Jules?"

"A young snip of a stranger got into an argument with Monk," Tain said, and went on to explain, making it short and crisp. "I don't know who the big feller, who backed the kid's play was. Never saw him before. But the kid—" The gambler paused, allowing himself a small smile. "He had come in looking for Nora Westerly. He told Ray she was his mother."

He was watching for it, so he saw the shock that went through the man behind the desk. It gave him a thin satisfaction.

"How old?" Cordele's voice was suddenly raspy, like a file drawn across an iron bar.

"Twenty—maybe twenty-one," Tain muttered. "Good-looking youngster. Blond—"

Cordele hunched over the desk. Through the eye-slits in his mask he seemed to be staring across the room, past Tain, and the gambler had the uncomfortable feeling that the man was looking through him, looking down the bleak corridor of past years.

There was suddenly a cold and deadly quality in that closed room. As if the memories brought up by that name had caused a distortion in the air, in the very soul of the man at the desk. Despite him-

self Tain shivered.

Cordele licked his thin lips, and with the small gesture his attention came back to the gambler.

TAIN added hurriedly, "The big feller with the kid was like Rike—in size, and the kind of clothes he was wearing. And salty as they come! He was standing beside Slim Klebb when the kid started yelling for Monk, and he knocked Klebb out before Slim had a chance to move. Did it so fast and smooth no one even saw him do it. When Rike took a hand, this big hombre called him fast and plenty!" Tain paused to take a breath. "Hell, Boss, I sent Slim out to get Questra."

Cordele nodded. There was a faint, almost admiring smile on his lips. "Maybe it is a job for Questra," he admitted. "Or mine." He laughed softly. "Only one man I know could raise the kind of hell this fellow you're talking about has been kicking up—and I've been expecting him."

Tain frowned. "Who?"

"The Lone Wolf," Cordele said. His voice was edged, like the blade of a fine Toledo sword. "Jim Hatfield—Captain McDowell's top trouble-shooter!"

Tain spat out his crushed cigarette. "The Rangers—"

He didn't finish the thought. He was suddenly concerned with his own skin, with plans which had been forming these past months. He had never been satisfied being Cordele's pawn.

"Yeah, the Rangers!" Cordele snapped. He corrected grimly, "One Ranger. The Lone Wolf!" He laughed softly. "A worthy opponent, Tain."

"He's never been beat," Tain muttered.

"Not by speed," Cordele admitted. "Not gun speed. But this time Hatfield's going to run into both speed *and* brains! And McDowell's going to lose his best lawman!" His voice held a flat certainty.

Tain reserved his doubts. Maybe Cordele would beat this Lone Wolf, but a lot of men would get hurt while he was doing it!

Cordele rose, stretched tall for a mo-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

WEARY QUERY

ONCE upon a time there was a Texas rancher who accepted everything that happened as a manifestation of the Divine Power. All his life he was beset by misfortune, yet never once did he complain.

He got married and his wife ran away with one of his ranch hands. His daughter was deceived by a no-good who never intended to marry her anyway. His son was lynched for cattle stealing. A fire burned down his home, a cyclone blew away his ranch buildings, a hailstorm killed most of his cattle and a banker foreclosed his mortgage. Yet at each fresh stroke of misfortune, he knelt and gave thanks to the Divine Power and its infinite wisdom.

Finally, penniless, he landed in the poorhouse. One day the superintendent sent him out to plow potatoes. As he trudged along behind the plow and underfed horse a thunderstorm came up and a bolt of lightning killed the nag, melted the plowshare, stripped the clothing from his back, singed off his whiskers, and hurled him through a barbed wire fence.

When he regained consciouness he got slowly to his knees, clasped his hands and raised his eyes reverently toward heaven. "Lord," he said, "ain't you agoin' a little too far?"

—Al Spong

ment, a lean and deadly figure. "Where's Madge?"

Tain jerked his head. "Saw her go to her room fifteen minutes ago." He made a disparaging gesture with his shoulders. "She's been acting strangely since yesterday afternoon—since that kid walked in asking for Nora Westerly. If she leaves the saloon, I've ordered Jules to trail her, to see where she goes."

Cordele nodded. "I'm going down the hall," he said. "Keep everybody downstairs. For a half-hour. No one comes up. Understand?"

Tain nodded sullenly.

He unlocked the door and stepped out. The landing was empty and he looked over the railing into the big room below. Ray was sweeping behind the counter. He didn't look up.

Tain walked down the stairs without looking back. He didn't hear Cordele leave his office. . . .

Nora Westerly—Madge Tucker—best known professionally simply as Madge, had been staring out the window for a long time. She was still in street clothes, having only removed her hat. The small lines in her face were marked now, and there were shadows under her eyes.

She had slept little last night.

Twenty years had come back to jolt her. Twenty years that were embodied in the compact figure of a boy to whom she had given birth, the child she had renounced a year later.

It had been a bitter decision then. But the passing years had taken the edge from the renunciation. Even now she had no regrets. Giving up the boy to her sister had been best.

She had married a man named John Leslie Westerly, an egomaniac, a ham actor with grandiose visions. A man who had had no idea of responsibility, nor any inclination for the rôle of fatherhood.

A man who had left her ten days after Steve Westerly was born.

She had found herself with a living to make—and a decision. She had made them both. One immediately, while the boy had still been an infant. She had turned him over to her sister who had married a carnival man.

AS FOR the other—she had made a living. Of sorts. She had a good voice, but not good enough. And she had drifted West, from one raw frontier town to another. The road had narrowed with the passing years.

Strange, she was thinking numbly, that in this dead-end mining town the threads of her life should be drawn together. It was here that she had come across her husband again—still a ham actor. But this time his stage was a corner of Texas west of the Pecos, and he was playing his biggest rôle behind the winking footlights of his crashing Colts.

For John Leslie Westerly had drifted West, too—had taken the name Jerome Cordele—but had become that outlaw scourge known only as Cordele!

She stirred slightly, then suddenly became aware of someone in the room. She had not heard a sound, but she knew someone was standing inside the door, watching her. She got up quickly.

Cordele said softly, "Good-looking boy, isn't he? Looks more like you, though. Not like the Westerlys at all."

Nora's eyes held a touch of fear. "He doesn't know. Leave him alone, John. He'll go away. He won't stay here."

Cordele sneered. "He should stay. I want to meet him. After all, he *is* my son!"

Nora shook her head. "You lost all claim to him twenty years ago." She added bitterly, "So did I. The least we can do is spare him this."

Cordele laughed softly. "You were less sentimental once. You've grown soft. You've been seeing too much of that old fool Travers." His voice was suddenly cruel. "Are you forgetting you are still my wife?"

Nora sagged against the window frame. "I've never forgotten," she said faintly. "Must you always tear apart everything I touch? Why don't you let Corby Travers be? He's put everything he has into that stage line. Let him run it."

Cordele laughed. "Now really!"

"I'll leave Vulcan. I'll never see him again."

"You always were a dreadfully poor actress," Cordele taunted.

She stiffened angrily. "What do you want?"

He made a small gesture with his shoulders. "My boy, maybe. You." His laughter rippled softly across that room.

Fear came into her eyes now, stark and chilling. "John—"

But he was gone, a slim noiseless shadow. The door closed softly but definitely behind him. She didn't move. She sat down, and for a long time sat there with the spear of fear driven deep into her heart.

CHAPTER VIII

Jail Bait

HATFIELD killed the rest of the morning in a small bar playing pinochle with the bartender and asking idle questions. He learned that about a year ago Marshal Tensel had been hired by a committee made up of local merchants to keep order in town. That had been at the height of the town's boom, just after the gold strikes in the hills south of the desert.

But the mines had petered out almost immediately, all except two which mined enough ore to keep part of the boom going in Vulcan. However, other strikes had been made further down the long arid valley which had been named the Gold Strip, and smaller settlements had mushroomed around them.

The Old Poker Hand Mine, he learned, was southeast of town. There was an old wagon road at the first branch-off that led to it. The mine had been abandoned six months ago.

Concerning the Travers Transportation Company, the bartender observed that it would be a boon to the town, as well as to the settlements of the Gold Strip which were cut off from the northern markets by the desert. But he had muttered the prevalent opinion, which seemed to be that Corby Travers would never get started.

It was mid-afternoon when Jim Hatfield walked back to the hotel. The Preacher was behind his desk, reading. He laid *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* down as the Ranger tossed his plug cut on the desk.

"Thought you had forgotten," the hotelman said. He looked closely at his guest. "Leaving?"

"Maybe, but only for a day or two," Hatfield said.

He went upstairs for his warbag and came back down, heading for the stables.

Goldy nudged him, restless and eager. The Ranger stroked the sleek neck. "Time to get the kinks out of you, boy," he murmured.

He had the saddle on and was tightening the cinch straps when Manuel poked his head in the doorway. The youngster had a grin that threatened his dirty ears.

"Señor Brown is leaving, no?"

"Señor Brown" nodded. The Mexican boy edged into the barn, his eyes wide with admiration, shiny with some secret knowledge. "The señor prefers the night air for a *pasado, si?*" he asked gravely.

Hatfield's eyes narrowed, then a grin stretched his lips. "*Si,*" he answered soberly.

He tossed Manuel a half-dollar, mounted, and rode out of the yard. Turning left upon entering the street, he rode past the marshal's small office, but saw no sign of Pete Tensel.

He headed south, rode on past the cutoff to the Old Poker Hand Mine, and steadily on for another twenty minutes, then turned sharply off the road. There he reined in and looked back. There was no telltale smudge on the road behind him.

He headed into the arid hills, circling eastward. It was about three o'clock by the sun when he found the old mine shaft. A board sign, barely legible, was nailed to the timber above the entrance.

THE OLD POKER HAND MINE

A small dump barrow lay on its side just inside the opening. A hundred feet down a eucalyptus tree cast a splash of shade. The Ranger dismounted here and hunkered down, his back against the trunk, and rolled a cigarette.

He waited a half-hour before he heard someone coming up the old wagon road. Goldy lifted his head and listened.

A red-wheeled gig came into view around a low sand ridge a hundred yards downslope. A woman was driving. There was no one with her.

Jim Hatfield came to his feet, his gray-green eyes moving alertly past the vehicle, studying the road where it disappeared around the ridge. The buggy wheels made a soft whirring in the sand.

THE woman drew up by the tree and sat there, resting her hands in her lap. She was about forty, Hatfield judged, but she had retained much of her beauty and some of the slimness of youth. She was looking at him, studying him soberly.

"You the man Captain McDowell sent?"

He nodded. "I am B. Brown, ma'am."

She seemed taut, suspicious. "Have you any—proof?" Her voice was dry, tight in her throat.

He smiled. He reached for his badge, secreted in a hidden pocket in his belt, held it in his palm for her to see the lone star, set in a silver circle—the symbol of Ranger authority throughout Texas.

She nodded. "I'm Madge," she said. "I work in Tain's Oasis."

"Tain's a lucky man," Hatfield said.

Her smile was tremulous. "And I can understand why Captain McDowell sent you, if you are as handy with a gun as you are with flattery." She shrugged. "You want Cordele?"

He nodded.

"He'll kill me when he finds out," she said. She seemed to be talking to herself, and there was a note of misery in her voice.

Hatfield said kindly, "Maybe he'll never know, Madge."

She looked at him. "I don't care about myself. Believe me. But there's a boy—" Again she didn't finish. It was as though she suddenly realized that her troubles could mean little to this big, wide-shouldered Ranger, that only Cordele mattered to him.

"Straight east," she said, lifting her head. "Across the desert. There's a peak in the Vulcans, shaped like a sombrero. Head east and keep this on your left, and you'll run into a narrow canyon."

The Ranger frowned. "Is that where I'll find Cordele?"

Madge shook her head. "You'll find the governor's boy there, perhaps. And Questra, Cordele's right-hand man. But Cordele himself—"

A shot made a flat, racking sound in the hot stillness!

Madge—Nora Westerly—seemed to freeze. Her eyes went wide, as if they had been shocked open. She started to rise—

The Lone Wolf was whirling, his guns leaping to his hands. The next bullet took a chunk out of the eucalyptus, three inches past his head.

His right-hand Colt smashed out twice. But the range was far and the rifleman showed only a glint of steel on the low ridge flanking the road.

The next slug was closer. Hatfield felt its burn across his face. He stumbled against Goldy, jerked his Winchester from his saddle scabbard and whirled, standing spread-legged, exposing himself as he waited for a shot. The sun glinted on the rifle on the ridge, and he saw the dark outlines of a head and shoulders.

He fired twice, a thin, deadly smile on his face. He saw the rifleman jerk, stumble up. Hatfield's next deadly shot spun him around like a rag doll.

The buggy team was plunging, trying to get away from the hammering shots. The woman had slumped down, the reins sliding from her fingers.

Goldy whirled as Jim Hatfield hit saddle.

He caught up to the runaway gig about two miles ahead, before the road joined

the main line to Vulcan. Madge lay slumped between the seat and the dashboard, but the jolts were sliding her body for a fall.

Hatfield whispered in Goldy's ear. The big sorrel edged close to the whirring wheels and the rider leaned way out of saddle, his fingers reaching for the trailing reins. He hauled them in, then braced himself in saddle.

"Whoa!" he commanded. "Hold up there!"

The matched bays slowed, stopped. Hatfield slid out of saddle, still holding to the reins. Madge lay crumpled, one arm dangling over the left wheel. Blood masked her face.

HATFIELD'S lips were tight as he climbed into the seat and lifted her body. She was limp, seemingly lifeless, but he detected the rise and fall of her bosom. She was still alive.

"Follow along, boy," he ordered Goldy grimly.

He had to get this woman to Vulcan. But he couldn't tell if she would live to get there.

Hatfield drove into town at sundown, holding the unconscious Madge in the curve of his right arm. There was blood on his own face, a thin dried streak that brought out the hardness of this man. He drove past the marshal's office and the Travers Transportation Company and attracted attention all the way. By the time he had turned the corner and pulled up before Dr. Hames' house he knew he had a following.

He dropped the reins and lifted the woman into his arms. The buggy creaked as he stepped down, walked to the small picket gate, kicked it open.

He didn't go inside. For the gun that was jabbed into the small of his back was hard, and definite. The voice that snarled in his ear was equally so.

"The first time you drove into town with a wounded man I didn't like it. This time I aim to get a lot of explanations!"

Hatfield turned his head. Marshal Tensel was holding a gun on him, and the hammer was cocked. Other men were converging toward them. Corby Travers was hobbling among them.

"Don't be a damn fool!" Hatfield growled to the marshal. "This woman is badly hurt. Let me get her inside first."

"I was a fool once before," the lawman snarled. "Fool enough to let you go. This time you're coming with me." He didn't take his eyes off Hatfield. "You Crowthers, Lem—take Madge inside."

Two men moved slowly forward and the Ranger let them take the woman. Corby Travers came up, breathing heavily. His face went white as he saw who was being carried into the doctor's house.

"What happened, Brown? I saw you ride by in Madge's gig—"

"Better get inside the house with her," Hatfield muttered. "I'll explain later."

Tensel sneered, "Damn right you'll explain." He stepped back. "You got two guns, but I got one in my hand. And I'm just hoping you make a try for one of them, Brown!"

Jim Hatfield shrugged. He turned and started down the street, the marshal behind him.

Goldy watched them, ears pricked alertly for some word from his rider. When it didn't come, he started to follow.

Several curious men followed the marshal and his prisoner, the others hung around the doc's house. The sun's red glow was fading from the street.

Hatfield walked slowly, keeping a few paces ahead of the grim lawman. He knew what was eating the marshal. Tensel was playing to the crowd, trying to impress them, and any excuse would do in order to jail the man who had humiliated him.

For a moment Hatfield was tempted to reveal himself to Tensel. With time running out as it was, he didn't relish being held in the marshal's back-room cell while Pete Tensel strutted around town. But once it became known that a Ranger was in town, his chances of finding Cordele and—more important—of finding the governor's boy alive, would be slim.

He had to get away! He couldn't wait

now to find out if Madge would live, couldn't wait to find out from her who Cordele was. She had given him a lead, a direction to head for, and the rest of it was up to him.

He glanced back once, and saw Goldy trailing behind. He smiled grimly.

THEY were on the plank walk now, coming up to the office. The door was closed.

"Open it!" Tensel snapped. "Walk in slowly. Walk straight ahead."

Hatfield opened the door, kicked it wide. He looked back at Tensel who was just stepping onto the walk. Goldy was moving slowly toward him.

"All right, Goldy!" Hatfield said sharply. "Get him!"

The marshal stiffened. "You damn fool!" he snarled. "Who you trying to fool—"

The big sorrel's muzzle sent him staggering. His Colt went off, ripping a ragged furrow in the plank walk. He was still stumbling, cursing wildly, as Hatfield's Colt slammed down across his head.

Tensel sprawled face-down across the threshold of the office. He didn't move.

Hatfield straddled the marshal's body, his Colt muzzling the men in the street.

"Turn around and start running!" he ordered grimly. He snapped a shot into the dust under the feet of the nearest, open-mouthed onlooker.

The street emptied in ten seconds.

Goldy was lunging up the road as Hatfield hit saddle. A rifle went off half-heartedly as he turned the corner. Then Goldy hit the open stretch to the desert and headed toward the big bright star lifting above the horizon.

CHAPTER IX

The Holdup

EARLY MORNING SUN laid its flat rays against the squalid buildings of Vulcan. The marshal stood in his doorway, staring toward the low hills looming past the town, a dark hate in his eyes. His hat hid the lump on his skull; the pain, combined with a sense of helpless frustration, had given him a sleepless night.

He saw Corby Travers come up the walk across the street, moving slowly, head bent. The man had spent the night by Madge's side in Dr. Hames' house. The marshal knew this, as he knew that Corby was in love with the Oasis singer.

Tensel shifted restlessly, thoughts sifting through his aching head.

A riderless horse had come into town last night—he had recognized it as Jules Monage's long-legged roan. Its reins had been trailing, with mesquite twigs still entwined among them.

This morning two men had ridden out from the Oasis, and had returned two hours later with Jules' body across saddle. They had found him, they said, on the ridge overlooking the road near the Old Poker Hand Mine.

That had made little sense to the marshal. But he knew it meant something to Ned Tain, for shortly the gambler had come riding down the street, warbag tied down behind him, heading out toward the distant black peaks of the Vulcans.

Tensel took a last pull at his cigarette. Moving gingerly, he headed for the lunchroom around the corner.

At about the same time Steve Westerly climbed up to the seat of the old Concord. An iron box containing fifteen thousand dollars in gold was stowed under the seat.

Dave Menock, superintendent of the Golden Nugget Mine, was standing beside Corby Travers. Menock was a fleshy, red-faced man, a family man, and he was worried.

"It's not the money," he was saying. "Damn it, Corby, I'm willing to risk that. But you can't go along! Not riding up there as gun guard!"

Travers' lips were set. "Not a man in Vulcan would take the job," he pointed out bitterly. "Not for any money. It's my stage line and my risk. I'm seeing it through, Dave!"

"Maybe I could get one of the men at the mine," Menock muttered.

"It's too late," Travers answered shortly. He looked back at Melody who was standing in the office doorway. "I know what you think of Madge," he said slowly. "But I'd like it if you went over to Doctor Hames' house and helped." When Melody made no answer, he added stubbornly, "I should have told you before, girl. If Madge lives, I'm going to marry her."

THE sun climbed up the vaulted blue sky, burning down over the silent arid land. The way station of Apache lay silent in the brutal heat, seemingly deserted. Up on the hill behind the adobe a gaunt-flanked brindle kept silent vigil over a grave.

Jim Hatfield waited in the cool of the station. Goldy was picketed behind the low building, out of sight of the road from Vulcan.

His daughter was looking up at Steve, scarcely listening to her father. She was seeing only the blond young fellow sitting straight against the sky, and trying to understand the strange ache in her heart.

Corby Travers shrugged and swung up beside Steve. Dave Menock, silent now, knowing there was nothing left to say, handed the shotgun up to the white-templed Travers.

"Good luck," he muttered.

Travers nodded. Then he turned to Steve. "Let her roll, son. . . ."

The Lone Wolf had spent the night here, and the morning, and he was growing impatient, waiting for the stage. He may have guessed wrong, he thought, and Cordele's riders probably had intercepted it between Vulcan and Apache, in which case it would throw his plans awry.

He got up and began to pace restlessly. He had four days left, and he felt the pressure of time fretting his nerves. He went to the door and looked out across the desert. The heated air shimmered over the dun-gray land and in the distance the

Vulcans rose against the brassy sky, black and drear and mysterious.

Out there, somewhere, Cordele had his hideout. Out there, too, if he was still alive, was ten-year-old Ross Winterlee.

Hatfield was turning away from the door when he saw the stage. It came swinging around the low hill to the south, moving at a steady pace. Dust boiled up behind it.

Squinting, the broad-shouldered Ranger recognized Steve Westerly up on the seat, handling the reins. Corby Travers was hunched beside him.

Relief tugged a brief smile across the watching man's lips. This was a new rôle he was going to play. Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger—turned holdup man!

But it was his last chance to get to Cordele's hideout!

He paced back swiftly into the darkness of the station, knowing that they couldn't see him from the brightness of the yard.

The stage rolled up, big grays swinging briskly, wheels grinding on the hardpan. The Concord creaked as Steve brought the team to a halt at the door.

Travers' eyes scanned the area, narrowing bitterly at the empty corral. Up on the hill the graves of George and Joel were grim reminders of the hazards connected with the idea of a stage line across the desert.

"We'll unhitch here, Steve," he said heavily. "Turn the team loose in the corral. We'll rest them until sundown and take the desert at night."

He was climbing down, the shotgun tucked under his right arm, and didn't see Hatfield come to the door. But he heard Hatfield's flat, hard voice:

"I'll take that fifteen thousand in gold you're freighting, Travers, and I'll take that now!"

Travers had one foot on the ground, the other still up on the iron rest. The shotgun was in an awkward position for quick handling and he didn't try to use it. He turned his head, his whole body going rigid, his eyes dark with surprise.

Up on the seat Steve was hunched forward, staring at the tall, hard-faced man in the doorway. He looked at the rock-steady Colt in the Ranger's fist, but he couldn't believe it.

"Brown!" he said, dropping the name into the stillness. "What is this—a joke?"

The Lone Wolf shook his head curtly. "No joke. I'm drifting out of this country, son, and fifteen thousand simoleons make a good stake." He looked at Travers, his lips stretching hard against his teeth. "Let's call it payment for my services," he offered bluntly.

"Call it, hell!" Steve flared. "You dirty, doublecrossing—" He moved in a quick, blind jerk for his gun, lifted it clean.

The flat smash of Hatfield's Colt numbed his hand. His gun spun in the bright sunlight, hit the hardpan, and went off. The aimless slug chipped a piece of adobe off the corner of the station.

Travers came around, a sob choking in his throat. He was swinging the muzzle when Hatfield's hand, chopping down, struck the weapon from his hand.

INSTANTLY the Ranger stepped on the shotgun barrel and prodded Travers with the muzzle of his Colt. "Back up, Travers!" he snapped. "Climb up into the seat." He snapped to Steve, "You! Toss that box down here!"

Steve's lips set stubbornly. His eyes were on Hatfield, dark and shot with an implacable hatred. "Come and get it, you damn—"

Corby Travers climbed up into the seat. "Steve!" he said, putting a hand on the young driver's arm. His voice was flat, without tone. He reached under the seat, tugged the box out, and dropped it to the ground.

Steve's voice was bitter. "You'd better travel far, Brown," he said grimly. "And fast. Because I'm coming after you!"

"Right now you do the traveling," Hatfield interrupted curtly. "Pick up those reins and head back for Vulcan!"

Travers said stiffly, "Let's go, Steve!"

The younger man took the reins in his hands. His voice was thick in his throat: "I'm coming after you!"

He swung the fidgety grays around in a tight circle and headed out of the yard, away from the sun-beaten way station. He drove slowly, tears of rage pouring down his cheeks. Travers sat stiffly beside him, staring off into space.

Jim Hatfield watched the stage dwindle on the road to Vulcan. Then he whistled for Goldy. Lifting the heavy box up to Goldy's saddle, he roped it securely. The big sorrel snorted his displeasure at the extra weight.

Hatfield swung up into saddle. He glanced once more toward the stage, just rounding a bend in the road.

"If it works out, Corby," he muttered, "I'll bring the gold back. If it doesn't—"

The sun burned like a poker across his broad shoulders as he struck out across the desert toward the black Vulcans. . . .

Steve Westerly stopped the stage around the first low hill. His face was brown and hard, stiff with unrelenting hate. "I'm going back!" he said. "I'm going to get him, Mr. Travers!"

The older man shook his head. "Let him go, son. Two men have already died, and one is badly hurt. I don't want your blood on my hands, Steve."

"This is personal," Steve snapped. "Between me and Brown." His teeth grated as he looked back. "I thought he was on the level. I hate to be taken for a sucker."

Travers shrugged. "I was fooled, too. I've seen a lot of men—all kinds. I would have staked my reputation that the big fellow was honest." He put his hand on Steve's shoulder. "Let him go. Ride back with me."

Steve shook his head. "Loan me a horse. And a canteen."

Travers said sharply, "No!"

Steve shrugged. "All right." He jumped down and started back toward the station.

Corby Travers' stubbornness deserted him. "Steve—all right!" He realized that further argument was useless. "Take Baldy, the left leader," he muttered. "Rangy, with lots of stamina."

He waited, head bowed against the blazing sun, while Steve unhitched Baldy, fashioned a bridle for the animal.

"You'll find a five-gallon canteen in the box."

He lifted his shoulders as Steve swung around sharply, and said, "We've got company, Mr. Travers. Know him?"

Travers nodded, hope fading as quickly as it had flared up. "Yeah, I know him, son."

Captain Bowers came plodding up the road, the burro following him. He walked with head down and he didn't see them until he was less than a hundred feet from the stage. Then he stopped, looked up, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"Howdy," he greeted.

STEVE nodded shortly and turned away. He found the canteen and slung it over his shoulder.

The desert rat eyed him as he swung up to the big gray's back. "Going some place, son?"

Steve looked down at him. "Yeah." He jerked his thumb toward the far black hills.

"Mind if I come with you, mate?" A grin twisted the prospector's beard-stubbled features. "Ain't a place out there I haven't navigated. Might be I could be of help to you?"

Steve shrugged. "I'm looking for a man—"

"I'll help you," Cap Bowers said. He chuckled. "If he went into the desert, there ain't many places he could be headed. I know all of 'em."

Steve looked at Travers who made a small, completely neutral gesture.

"A man ain't going to travel far in this heat," the prospector added quickly. "Not even with a cayuse. Walking is surer, if you know where you're headed. That's why me and Blinky never got lost."

Steve lifted his hard face. "I'll see you in Vulcan, Mr. Travers!"

Travers didn't say anything. He gathered up the reins and started the stage for home.

Steve waited until the stage was a small black dot against the glaring distance. Then he looked down at old Bowers.

"I'm stopping by the stage station, Cap. To pick up my Colt. I figure on using it."

The old prospector chuckled. "Carry one myself," he said. "Right here." He drew back the skirt of his coat and patted the butt of a surprisingly clean-looking gun stuck in the waistband of his trousers.

"Keep it for rattlers, son," he mumbled.

CHAPTER X

Desert Hideout

IN THE fading glare of the setting sun the Vulcans loomed black and twisted. To the grim-faced man riding a big, golden sorrel they easily took the shape of contorted dwarfs gathered around a colossal forge.

The Lone Wolf had ridden steadily, taking the brutal heat with tight lips. He was risking his neck on a long gamble, tossing it into the pot for a ten-year-old boy's life. He had used his water unsparingly, giving most of it to Goldy, for he knew there would be no turning back.

He had followed the directions Madge had given him, keeping the easily identifiable sombrero-shaped peak on his left. But the hills, looming up, presented a jumbled mass of narrow canyons, waterless and jagged rents in the great volcanic upthrust rising from the desert floor.

Edging the big sorrel into the scant shadow of a rock spar, he surveyed those hills with bleak eyes. He could make out several narrow canyons, any one of which could be the one Madge had meant.

Impatience struck through him, hardening his lips. "Reckon we'll just have to take our chance, Goldy," he muttered. "If Cordele's hiding out near here, he'll find us!"

He rode boldly forward, making no attempt to hide. And he kept looking at the ground, as though following a trail.

The slug, when it came, made a lead blotch on a flat rock two feet to one side! The high, tortured scream of the ricochet lingered in the heated air, merging with the warning crack of a rifle.

The Lone Wolf pulled up and scanned the rocks ahead. A stony ridge jutted from the looming barrier, curling like a grasping black finger into the desert. His glance moved over it, but he saw no one move and there was no other shot.

Slowly Hatfield lifted his hands and clasped them across his hat. He kneed Goldy forward.

A glint of steel high up on the ridge caught his eye now, and he watched it with bleak alertness. He couldn't see it, but he sensed the grim muzzle of a rifle looking down at him, keeping him targeted against the desert floor.

He was puzzled by the rifle shot. It must have been a warning—to him, and to whoever was at the hideout in the canyon!

The light began to fade out of the sky as he rode forward. The darkening ridge curved, and he was guided by it, funneled toward a rent in the black wall ahead. He had ridden another thousand yards when four riders came through the canyon pass.

Hatfield pulled up and waited.

In the deepening dusk they were no more than shadows at first. They came on at a steady lope, a silent, compact group forming out of the blackness behind them.

He waited, knowing a rifle was trained on his back; knowing, too, that there would be no turning back.

Goldy snorted softly as the horsemen pulled up a few feet away. One man dominated the four riders, a small dark man, half a head shorter than Hatfield; a slim, deadly man on a big white horse. He sat slack in saddle, smoke from a half-burned cigarette curling up past his sharp, bony face.

Yet even in his lounging a restless energy exuded from him. He reminded the Ranger of a timber wolf he had seen caged, paused for a moment in its restless pacing. He was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and nondescript clothes, but the pearl handles of twin Colts thonged down on his flanks were conspicuously clean.

This, Hatfield speculated grimly, would be Questra—Cordele's right-hand man!

The other three were hardcases of the usual type, beard-stubbled, rough—men who found the lure of the quick, unearned dollar easier than honest work. One of them Hatfield recognized as the lanky man he had knocked out in the Oasis.

THIS man edged his cayuse close to Questra and muttered something in the slim man's ear. Questra squinted at Hatfield, reappraising him with a cold alert stare.

"Howdy," the Ranger said levelly. "I'm looking for Cordele!"

Questra dropped his right hand to his Colt, his lips thinning against strong white teeth. "*Si,*" he said softly. "Many men have come looking for Cordele. They are still looking, señor—"

"Brown," Hatfield supplied easily. "Sometimes called the Utah Kid." He was thinking fast, for the presence here of the Oasis gunman had placed him on the spot. "Things got kind of hot up north," he added, "and I decided to drift down toward the Border."

Lanky Slim Klebb sneered, "You didn't drift far enough, Brown!"

"Reckon I made a mistake in town," Hatfield admitted. "Horned in when I should have kept my big nose out of it. There was nothing personal meant, feller."

Klebb fingered his sore jaw. "Questra, the damn fool has rode right into our hands! Tain sent me out here to get you to come to town"—he chuckled—"but he's saved you the trouble."

"*Un mal hombre,*" Questra said lazily. He was supremely confident, sure of his own gun prowess and not impressed by that of others. "Perhaps Cordele would like to see him, Sleem."

Jim Hatfield said grimly, "That's who I came to see." He edged Goldy around with his knee. "There's fifteen thousand dollars in gold in this box behind me. I thought I'd contribute this for a chance to join Cordele's raiders!"

Questra's hand came up and there was a Colt in his palm. "You carry gold with you, Señor Brown?" he asked softly.

"Not generally," Hatfield replied levelly. "Happens I held up the stage this morning and hit the jackpot."

Questra glanced at Klebb who shook his head sullenly. "I didn't know," he muttered. "I didn't think Travers could find a driver, after what happened at Apache. Let alone have the nerve to ship fifteen thousand dollars in gold."

Questra eyed Hatfield as he ordered the man on his right, "Luke, take Señor Brown's guns!"

Hatfield stiffened. But with a rifle at his back and Questra's Colt muzzling him, there was nothing he could do.

Luke edged his cayuse around Goldy and reached carefully for the guns under Hatfield's coat. He hefted the matched pair, whistled admiringly.

"The box," Questra added. "Look inside, Luke. Perhaps he is lying, eh?"

Luke cut the box lose and dropped it into the sand. The squat longrider dismounted, dragged the box aside and shot the lock off with one of the Ranger's guns. He lifted the lid, then glanced quickly up at Questra.

"He wasn't lying," he said in surprise. He reached inside and lifted up a gold ingot. "Nice litle haul for a lone hand play, stranger!"

Hatfield said grimly, "I could have taken it and headed for the Border. Looks like I was a fool not to."

Questra drew the barrel of his Colt thoughtfully across the thin beard stubble on his jaw.

"Perhaps we *will* wait for Cordele, Señor Brown."

"Don't be a fool, Questra!" Klebb snapped. "How do we know he ain't lying just to—"

Questra backhanded him across the mouth. He did it casually, seemingly without anger. But he waited, eyes glittering, a cruel smile distorting his lips.

Klebb's whole body stiffened. For a brief instant he balanced on the narrow edge of suicide. Then he relaxed, wiped his arm across his bleeding mouth.

"I said we will wait for Cordele," Questra purred. "It is so—no?"

Klebb nodded sullenly. Questra turned back to Hatfield.

"Come," he said. "You will join us for supper. Maybe, in the morning, Cordele will be here."

FLANKED by Cordele's riders, the Lone Wolf rode to the desert outlaw's hideout. They rode between towering walls which shut out the sky—it was dark almost immediately. For several hundred yards the passageway was seldom more than a hundred feet wide, then it opened up to a small, grassy box canyon.

A big log house with two wings nestled in a clump of cottonwoods. Lamplight made a yellow splash against the darkness. Above the creaking of saddle leather Jim Hatfield heard the soft murmur of running water. Beyond the house a cow lowed sleepily.

A rider came away from the corrals beyond the trees, passing in front of them as they neared the house. He turned his head to look at Hatfield as he rode by, but he didn't stop, and he didn't ask questions.

Questra dismounted first and waited while Hatfield came out of saddle. The others crowded behind, all heading for the door. Luke, carrying the Golden Nugget iron box, walked across the big room and placed it on a bench by the window. He took Hatfield's Colts from his waistband and laid them on the box.

The others were already finding seats around a long wooden table. An oil lamp sat in the middle of it, spilling a bright circle of yellow over cups and other dishes.

Hatfield sat down across from Slim Klebb. Luke sat down next to him. The squat longrider obviously had accepted Hatfield, for he was careless as he sat down. The butt of his right-hand Colt nudged the Ranger's hip, bringing a sudden glint to Hatfield's hawk eyes.

Luke said, reaching across the table for a biscuit, "Dig in, Brown."

Hatfield grinned. "Won't need a second invitation," he said. He, too, reached for a biscuit and in the half shadows beyond the table he saw Questra, still standing, making no move to join them at the table.

"*Muchacho!*" Questra called.

A boy appeared in the doorway. He was a tall youngster for his ten years, but instantly Jim Hatfield knew who he was. Ross Winterlee had a fine, sensitive face and large brown eyes, but as he came within the light pattern the Ranger saw that his features were drawn and gaunt. He was wearing an old cotton shirt several sizes too big for him, and a pair of waist Levis were baggy on him.

Knowing that the boy would know him, Hatfield was praying that young Ross would not inadvertently give him away.

"Tell Muley we have one extra for supper," Questra snapped. "And you can bring the food now."

The boy's indifferent glance settled on Jim Hatfield. Luke was busy stuffing his mouth with hot biscuits and he didn't see the sudden gleam in the boy's eyes, the slight jerk of his thin shoulders.

"Yes, sir," the boy said, in a voice barely audible, and went back into the kitchen.

But Questra seemed dissatisfied for some reason. He stood at the head of the table, his eyes narrowed, watching, seeming to sense something that alerted him. He started to roll a cigarette, taking his time, being deliberate about it.

Hatfield tensed. There was a break coming and he knew it, though he couldn't understand what it would be, or why. His mind tallied the odds. Four men in the room, probably several more to join them later. The cook in the kitchen. And at least one guard up on the ridge at the entrance to the canyon.

The governor's son came in with a big platter of steaks and set it down on the table. Questra took a long pull at his cigarette as he watched the boy walk quickly back to the kitchen.

"We raise our own beef here, Brown," he said, "and the cook even makes his own beer. A nice hideout, eh, señor?"

Hatfield looked up. "Haven't seen better," he admitted. He was waiting now,

sensing the expectancy in Questra.

A tall, dour-faced man with a greasy apron tied around his middle came to the door.

He glanced impatiently at Questra and the longrider said softly:

"Muley, meet Señor Brown. He calls himself the Utah Keed!"

Muley turned toward the table. He stopped, his raw-boned body jerking erect. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder at Questra.

"Utah Kid, hell!" he said shrilly. "That's Ranger Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf himself!"

It must have been what Questra had expected, but he knew Hatfield was weaponless, and he waited too long!

Hatfield's fingers closed over Luke's gun as he heaved up, spilling the table over Klebb and the other rider sitting opposite. The lamp went with it, mingling with the falling dishes.

There was a split moment of light just before the lamp smashed—and in that moment Questra died. He didn't have time to clear leather. He fell sideward, a surprised curse fading on his lips as he struck the floor.

The heavy table pinned Klebb under it. He screamed as a puff of blue light ran over his kerosene-spattered clothes, and he began to thresh about wildly, trying to get free. His companion heaved to his feet with a Colt in his fist. Hatfield's shot raked across his ribs. He fell back, stumbled over Questra's body, and fired as he fell.

Luke had reached for his Colt after the first numbing shock of surprise. He still had his mouth crammed full of biscuits and the shot from across the table made him cough. He gagged, bending over the bullet in his stomach. He tried to stumble away from the table, for the outside door, but fell before he reached the threshold.

The cook had ducked for the kitchen at Hatfield's first shot. Young Ross Winterlee thrust his foot out as Muley plunged past. Off-balance, the cook rammed headfirst into the door frame. The impact broke his neck.

The fire was spreading fast across that tinder-dry floor. The Ranger hurdled over the table and made a run for the bench by the window. He dropped Luke's Colt and slipped his own into their holsters. Then, gathering the iron box under his arm, he swung toward the kitchen door.

Young Winterlee said, "There's a back door in here, Ranger!"

They went out through the kitchen, with smoke rolling thick behind them.

Cottonwoods cast a heavy shadow over the kitchen door where Hatfield hesitated.

The boy whispered tensely, "There's three more somewhere, sir! Two are always on watch."

Hatfield whistled for Goldy and the big stallion came around the corner, stirrups flapping. Hatfield heaved the governor's son up into the saddle, handed him the iron box. "Hold onto it, son," he ordered, as he slid into saddle behind the boy.

The fire would be claiming the attention of any of Cordele's longriders still around. But he knew, too, that the commotion would have alerted the guard on the ridge, and that he would be watchful for a break through the canyon.

Out in the darkness beyond the burning house, cattle lowed uneasily. An idea flashed through the Lone Wolf's head.

He sent Goldy running out of the shadows, into the light glow made by the fire. Flames were licking through the windows, curling toward the roof.

A rider sitting in confused inactivity in front of the cabin whirled as the Ranger rode up. There was a warbag tied behind his saddle, and in the flickering light of the fire Hatfield saw that the rider was Ned Tain, who ran the Oasis. That didn't surprise him for, after seeing Klebb here, he had realized there must be a tie-up between Tain and Cordele. Perhaps Tain *was* Cordele!

TAIN waited until Hatfield was almost on him before he went for his gun. The Ranger's slug tipped the man out of saddle, as Goldy swept past and kept on running. When the Ranger and the gov-

ernor's son hit the darkness beyond the glow of the burning building, vague shapes began milling, lowing in growing alarm. Hatfield fired his Colt into the air.

Instantly the cattle began to run. There were about a hundred steers in the small herd which Cordele kept in the canyon, for food. They bunched up as Hatfield drove them toward the canyon entrance.

It was dark in the narrow gap, black as pitch. But it was lighter out on the desert, and a good man up on the ridge with a rifle could make it tough for anyone trying to come in or out of the canyon. The stampeding steers boiled up a dust cloud as they went through. Hatfield rode in that cloud, keeping Goldy close on the heels of the drag. They went through without drawing a shot!

CHAPTER XI

Out of the Badlands

DAWN made a dirty smudge against the eastern rim of the desert, dimming the low-hanging stars. A cool wind prowled along the gully, ruffling the sleeping boy's hair.

The Lone Wolf finished saddling Goldy and securing the iron box to the cantle. He had slept little, and weariness made tiny lines around his mouth. He reached for the canteen and joggled it, his mouth tightening at realization of the water level.

Goldy nickered softly, nuzzling his shoulder. Across the big stallion's neck Hatfield could see the dark loom of the Vulcans, like a solid black mass against the still dark sky. The glow from the fire in the canyon hideout had faded.

He should have risked going back, he thought grimly. Without water it was going to be a rough haul across the desert to Vulcan. But going back might have risked the boy's life—and he'd promised the governor he would bring young Ross back

Standing there, his hands on the saddle, a thought nagged at him. Cordele's hideout had probably been gutted by the fire, the nucleus of his bunch of outlaws wiped out. But what of Cordele himself? Somehow the Ranger doubted that Tain was the renegade chief. Which meant that Cordele was still on the loose. And as long as the desert outlaw boss was alive it was a job left undone.

Cordele! No one had seen him, no one seemed to know who he was. Except the woman named Madge. Hatfield wondered if she was still alive.

He bent over the boy and shook his shoulder. Ross stirred. He came awake, startled, his black hair tumbling over his face.

"Saddle up." Hatfield smiled at him. "We've got a long, hot day ahead of us."

The boy came to his feet, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Goldy shifted restlessly.

The light was spreading swiftly across the sky. An unseen hand seemed to paint a pink swath under the grayness and the desert began to emerge from the colorlessness of night.

Hatfield boosted the boy into saddle. Big as Goldy was, even the sorrel had his limits of endurance, he thought. The boy would ride, but he, Hatfield, would walk.

He heard the ring of a shod hoof against the morning quiet, and the weariness planed swiftly out of his hard face. He moved away from Goldy, his big body alert, his cold eyes reaching out to the sound.

The gully curved in a wide loop to the south. Two men came around the bend a hundred feet away. One was young and he walked lightly, leading a rangy gray horse. The other, misshapen in baggy pants, was followed by a small burro loaded with prospector's tools.

The tenseness eased out of Hatfield.

Steve Westerly saw him as he came around the cutbank. Steve had one brief moment of stark surprise. Then he made a quick stab for the Colt he had stuck in his waistband.

Hatfield's sharp voice cut the stillness. "Hold it, Steve!"

Young Westerly held the muzzle level. This was his second surprise. He had seen this man kill Rike in Tain's Oasis, and he had not expected to beat him in a shoot-out. But now the man hadn't even made an attempt to draw.

He held himself, waiting.

Cap Bowers' cracked voice prodded him, "Well, son, what's holding you? Shoot the mangy pirate!"

The Ranger's eyes shifted to the old man. Bowers was standing with his back against his pack. He had been smoking a cigarette, but he was holding it now. Holding it between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand!

The Lone Wolf slouched grimly. Out of the depths of his memory he heard Captain McDowell repeat a description, "—has a funny way of holding a cigarette, Jim. Between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand."

A MAN with his index finger missing would learn to hold his cigarette between the others, Hatfield thought grimly. It would mean little to anyone who saw him. But if this same man later rode masked, and wore gloves with a false finger, then the trick of holding a cigarette that way would be both misleading and diverting.

Bowers stiffened, reading the recognition in Jim Hatfield's eyes.

"Steve!" Cap ordered sharply. His voice was no longer cracked, and he stood tall, the stoop gone from his shoulders.

But young Westerly was not looking at him. He was moving toward Hatfield, his boots scuffing in the soft sand.

"Shoot, Steve!" Bowers rasped tensely. "Don't let Hatfield—" He caught himself, his shoulders bunching.

Steve stopped. He turned his head slightly, puzzled. "You know him, Cap?"

Bowers' face seemed to crinkle. "You damned muddleheaded fool!" he yelled wildly, and went for his Colt in that same moment, jerking it free from under his sagging coat.

Jim Hatfield's slug rammed him back two steps. He tried to lift his gun, sobbing with the effort. His voice trailed into the desert stillness.

"Damn you, son—"

Steve swung back too late. His face was white as he thumbed a shot at the grim-faced Ranger down the gully. But he felt the shock of Hatfield's bullet, wrenching the Colt from his hand, burning a gash across his thumb, before his Colt went off. Hatfield said drily, "That's the second time I've had to do it, Steve. Let's not make it a third time!"

Steve turned to look at the sprawled figure of Captain Bowers. Then he looked up as Jim Hatfield walked toward him.

"He called you Hatfield," he said, wonderingly.

The Ranger nodded. He was holding his badge in his palm, and the authority of Texas lay in that silver circle and the lone star.

"I'm Jim Hatfield," he admitted. "Texas Ranger."

"The Lone Wolf!" Steve's tone was low. He walked to the crumpled prospector. "Who was he?"

"Cordele!" Jim Hatfield answered grimly.

He knelt beside the body. The greasy hat had fallen from the outlaw's head. The Ranger tugged at the thatch of white hair. The wig came off, revealing a close-cropped head of gray-shot black hair. He touched the lines in Cordele's still face, and understanding was in his tone.

"Grease paint." He looked up at Steve. "The man must have been an actor once."

He got up and stood a moment, looking across the desert. Cordele had played his last role!

* * * * *

Madge was sitting up in bed when Jim Hatfield entered her room in Dr. Hames' house. She motioned him to a chair.

"I sent the others outside," she said. She was pale and tired, but Dr. Hames had assured the Ranger she would recover, but he had cautioned, "Don't stay too long. She says she has to see you before you go, but—" He had shrugged.

"Cordele," she said now, slowly. "He's dead?"

Hatfield nodded.

She let out a long breath. "He was my husband," she said. "That's why I wanted to see you. He was a demon. I was afraid he would kill Corby, which was why I sent that note to Captain McDowell. I wanted to help the Rangers get him before he got Corby. Ad now—I wanted you to know—the whole story."

She went on to tell him, talking slowly, saving her strength, "I'm Nora Westerly. Steve's mother."

Jim Hatfield stood up, frowning. "Does he know?"

She shook her head. "His father's dead, and I think it'll be best if he thinks his mother's dead, too." She smiled tremulously. "But I will be seeing a lot of him. From what Corby told me about Melody, I think Steve'll be staying. I'll be his mother-in-law soon. Maybe it's best that way."

"If that's the way you want it," the Ranger agreed soberly.

SHE held out her hand and he took it. "Good-bye, Jim Hatfield," she said. "Come back some time, and see us."

He nodded, smiling.

They were waiting for him at the stage office. Steve was up on the driver's box, the reins between his fingers. The Golden Nugget shipment was stowed under his feet. Corby Travers was standing on the walk with Melody and Dave Mennock. Marshal Tensel pushed through the crowd.

"I've got no cause for complaint," he said, holding out his hand. "You cleaned up the Vulcan raiders, Hatfield, and made my job easy here in town." He smiled sheepishly. "Next time I go off half-cocked, I'll make sure it's not a Ranger I'm bucking."

Hatfield shook his hand.

Ross Winterlee tugged at his arm. "I want to ride up on the seat with Steve. May I?"

Hatfield nodded. "Roll her easy, Steve," he called up to the driver. "You've got an important passenger this trip!"

He swung up into Goldy's saddle and Steve flicked his horse with the tip of his long whip. "Yippeeee!" he yelled. "Let's roll!"

They went down the street, toward the turn to the desert.

Corby Travers looked at Dave Mennock.

"I reckon this time that shipment of yours is going through!" he said quietly. "That's the Lone Wolf, Jim Hatfield, riding guard."

Coming in the Next Issue

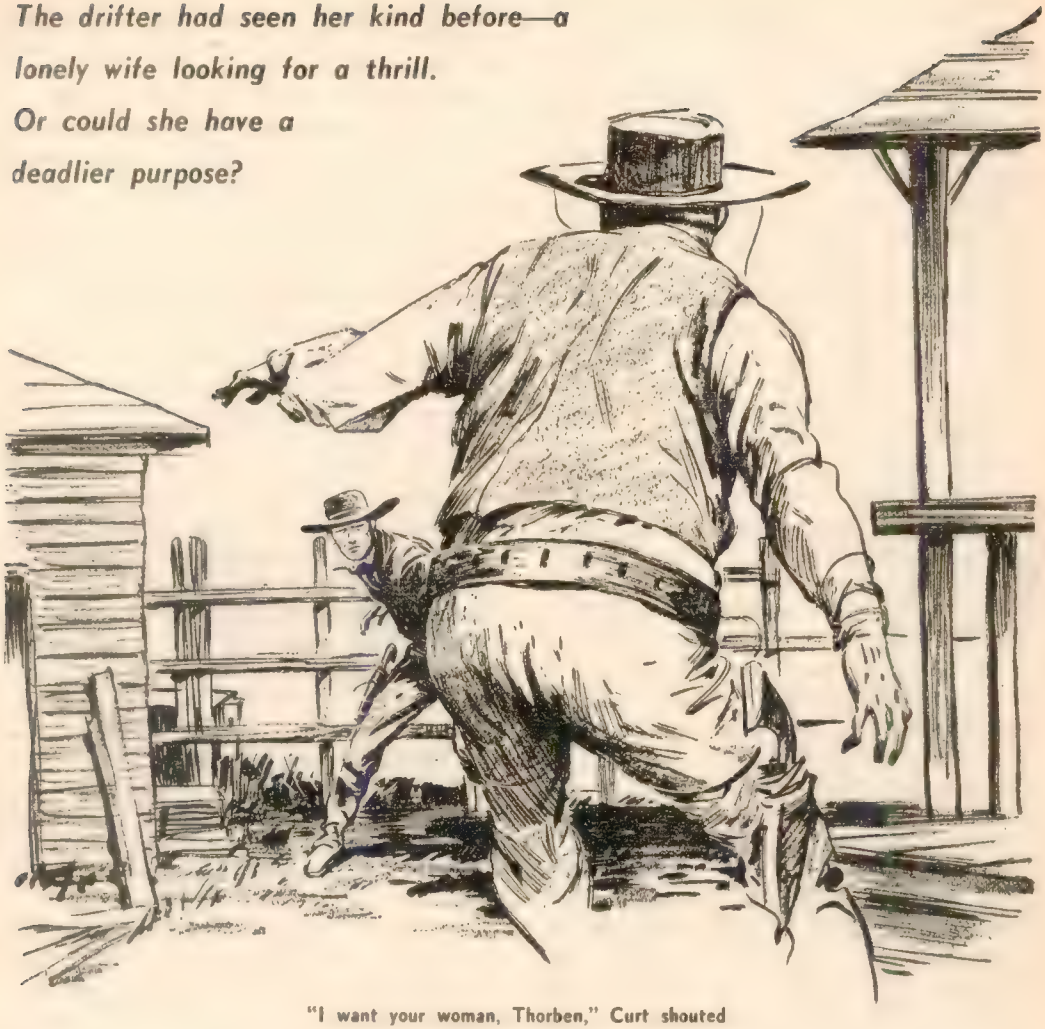
RED RIVER RAIDERS

Another Stirring Novel Featuring Jim Hatfield

By JACKSON COLE

PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES AND FEATURES!

The drifter had seen her kind before—a lonely wife looking for a thrill. Or could she have a deadlier purpose?



"I want your woman, Thorben," Curt shouted

Rancher's Woman

By ROBERT VIRGIL

HE STOOD in the shadowed interior of the barn, his eyes squinted to close out the glare of the sun on the brick yellow dirt of the ranch yard. Mina Thorben, tall and graceful, was coming toward him from the house. She walked with an air of indifference, but as she reached the barn doors she looked about quickly as though fearing to be observed. Curt Hodges pushed a stained, battered hat to the back of his head and grinned.

He watched the sun's rays flicker from her raven black hair as she came inside. The shadows deepened about her face. Her

beauty was an acquired, practiced kind of beauty that he had seen many times in dance hall queens, but not lately. His last job before he'd come here had been on a winter range many miles from the nearest town. That made Mina Thorben all the more lovely.

He stepped quickly sideward to intercept her as she came further into the barn. She gasped and he felt her warm softness against his lean, work-hardened body for an instant before she drew back. Warm brown eyes told him, frankly, that she wasn't at all alarmed.

"You saw me ride in," he said tactlessly, "and came trotting out here."

She nodded, a smile creeping about the corners of her lips.

"Your eyes have been playing patty-cake with mine ever since I came here," he continued. "Do you always look that way at drifters who stop off to work for your husband?"

She lowered her face demurely. It wasn't exactly the best act he'd seen. A cricket, hidden in some recess of the barn, sang a song to the darkness and emphasized her pretended indecision before she spoke.

"Not all of them. Just you."

He wondered if she was mocking him. "Just you." There had been a time when he would have accepted those words as the truth. Fifteen—twenty years ago when he was twenty or twenty-five. The gals had called him "handsome" then and had vied for a place next to him at the bar or table.

Now, on the rare occasions when he went into a town, they still called him that, but their eyes turned quickly away from the heavy, somber lines in his face. They didn't stay at his side so long now, either. The atmosphere of loneliness about Curt wasn't disturbed by gay company. It grew to enclose it.

HIS voice was dry and harsh. "What about your husband?"

"I don't care!" she said vehemently. "I don't love him."

Just a lonely little ranch woman looking for a thrill, he thought bitterly. Nobody's around but her husband and a drifter, so the drifter's it. She's expecting romance with pretty pink ribbons and vows of love.

His face hardened. He pulled her to him and crushed his lips brutally against hers.

They drew apart hastily as a horse's hooves *clop-clopped* across the hard-packed earth outside the barn, and swung guiltily toward the door. Ben Thorben rode into view, halted his horse and dismounted with middle-aged stiffness. He entered the barn, leading the animal, and saw them. His stocky body jerked to a halt and the startled surprise in his deep-set eyes faded to suspicion.

"What are you doing here?" His voice rumbled from deep in his body.

"It's my horse," Mina said quickly, too quickly. "He has a sore on his back and I wanted Hodges to look at it."

Thorben's gaze swung to Curt, letting the silence re-ask the question.

Quick resentment flared in the drifter. Then he caught the woman's warning glance.

"Finished the fence over in the west pasture," he said shortly.

Thorben studied Curt's face a moment then spoke tersely to the woman.

"Go put supper on the table."

She brushed past him and walked toward the house. The rancher followed her part way, then turned and came back to the barn to unsaddle his horse.

Curt hunted about for a can of ointment, aware that his employer was watching him closely. He found the preparation, a gooey mixture of axle grease and sulphur, and walked to the back stall where Mina Thorben's bay stamped nervously in the sour smelling straw.

There was a slight galled place on the animal's back. He began applying the ointment with a gentle touch, speaking to the horse in a soothing voice. Thorben appeared, craning his neck to see the injury.

"Bad?" his voice rasped.

"Not much. Probably a mesquite twig under his blanket last time he was rode."

"You've got a good hand with stock," Thorben commented. His tone said these were words leading to something else.

"It's easy, if you like them."

"Yeah." A pause, then, "I'm a funny man, Hodges. I'd kill anybody I caught messing with something wearing my brand."

Curt gave voice to the aimlessness that had made a drifter of him.

"The way I see it, Thorben, is that a man does pretty much what fate puts in his way of doing. He lives awhile, then, sooner or later, he dies. Can't much be done about it. Besides, sometimes a man's stock wanders off his range."

His slate-gray eyes stared bleakly across the bay's back into Thorben's puzzled expression. He wondered why men like Thorben couldn't understand that he just didn't have enough interest in life to heed their threats.

"I'll pay you off after supper," the rancher said at last. "It'd be best for you to ride on in the morning."

No sense in trouble that can be avoided, his manner said. Ride on and stay alive.

"Okay," Curt answered indifferently. He let Thorben reach the aisle before he added in a deliberate, prodding tone, "Must be hell, Thorben, trying to keep hands around here."

The stocky body whirled. Thorben's face, white and rigid with anger, seemed to burst out of the shadows.

"There've been quite a few. Most of them moved on when they were told!"

"Yes?"

"The two that didn't—stayed."

Curt felt cold hatred rise up in him. The ranch owner with his nice white house, his pretty woman, his fat stock and neat fences was a symbol of a kind of life that seemed far away and inaccessible. He came around the side of the horse to face Thorben, his hand dangling near his Colt.

There was a sound from the house. It was the woman's voice calling that supper was ready. The tension broke.

"Come on and eat," the rancher said gruffly, swinging away.

Curt followed him from the barn.

The meal was quiet. The woman seemed to sense that there had been trouble in the barn, and she ate with her eyes downcast, avoiding Curt's glances. He was a little disturbed over the rancher's complacency as though matters were settled. Once, when Mina Thorben rose to refill the biscuit dish, her eyes sought Curt's with the barest flicker of a message for him to guess at.

AFTER supper, his business with Thorben completed without incident, Curt strolled around the ranch yard, smoking and thinking. He paused here and there, observing details. Everything was in order. The place had an air of belonging to a man who relished his small achievements.

A small bunkroom built against the side of the barn served as quarters for the solitary hands Thorben hired to help him run the small spread. Like everything else it was neat and clean. Curt squatted in the doorway as dusk settled.

What was there in a man to make him want this kind of life instead of drifting around the country from one job to another? For the first time in his memory he was tormented by strong doubts about his aimless life. A place like this had to have a beginning. How had Thorben found the courage to begin, knowing that perhaps he would fail? It was enough to keep a man drifting forever.

He thought of the woman. If anything happened to Ben Thorben then the ranch would be hers. Hers and the man's whose woman she became. The thought grew in him. Here was a place in life that a man could step into without the insecurity of beginning. Another man had borne that.

He'd guessed right at the message in Mina Thorben's eyes. She came to the bunk room in the night as he lay awake waiting for her. The door opened and she slipped in silently, whispering his name. He groped for her in the darkness.

"No!" She grasped his arm. "I've got to go back. He might wake up."

"Maybe that'd be best."

"I want you to stay." There was a plea in her voice.

"I'm a drifter. Some day I'd move on. You'd be alone then."

"He'd be—dead?"

"Yes. That's the only way I can stay."

"That's the way it has to be," she breathed fiercely. "I want to be free of him."

"When I moved on, what would you do?"

"I'd sell out. I hate this place. It's lonely, away from everything. I'd buy myself some clothes and travel. Later, I'd settle down and open a little place."

"Place?"

"A saloon and dance hall. I can't live this kind of life. I made a mistake marrying him."

He'd been right about that, too. She was his kind of woman. When he rode on, if he did, there would be no strings, nothing to hold him back.

"Will you do it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Now! Tonight while he's asleep!"

"No. He always goes out to the barn the first thing every morning to see about the stock. I'll face him in the open."

"You might be killed!"

Her fear for him was a novelty, a pleasant sort of thing that he wanted to prolong.

"I'll take the risk."

He felt her shudder in his arms.

"He's fast with a gun," she said. "There've been others. He killed them."

A strange sense of exaltation ran through him.

"It won't be my first time, either," he said quietly.

He kissed her then and let her go, watching her cross the yard on swift, silent feet. . . .

Dawn had spread an ashy light over the ranch when Curt stepped from the bunk room. The cry of an owl sounded from somewhere out in the mesquite as though protesting the ending of his night time activities. The wind had risen, filling the air with fine dust that stung the drifter's eyes. He walked in a tight circle before the barn, working the stiffness from his body. Then, with a cigarette between his lips, he settled back against the wall, facing the house.

Before long the door of the house opened and Thorben appeared on the porch, gazing up into the clouded sky. He swept back a shock of grizzled hair and placed his stetson firmly on his head as he started down the steps. The break in his stride was almost imperceptible when he saw Curt, but his advance slowed until he reached the middle of the yard and stopped.

Curt flicked away his cigarette and moved out away from the wall so that the house wouldn't be in his line of fire. He studied Thorben's wary expression, knew that the rancher was aware of his purpose. It would be over in a minute. If Thorben died the ranch and the woman would be Curt's. If he, Curt, died then his desire for them would no longer exist. It was a simple matter.

Their eyes met, locked.

"I want your woman, Thorben!" Curt shouted. He realized that he'd moved the wrong way. He was facing into the wind and dust.

"Then take her!" Thorben bawled, his hand streaking for his hip.

CURT let his shoulders do the work. He felt the tug of his Colt against his fingers, felt its butt slap into his palm as he triggered a shot. Off center, he sensed. He corrected his aim, his finger tightening again. But he didn't fire.

Thorben's hand had come up empty. Oblivious to the burn of Curt's bullet across his arm he was staring at his holstered pistol in bewilderment. He raised his head, grim hatred in his eyes, but a calm acceptance, also.

"All right," he grated in a voice that was barely carried to Curt by the wind, "get on with it!"

Curt lowered his pistol. This wasn't the way he wanted it.

Thorben read his decision in the lowered Colt, and grasped his holster to twist it away from his body so he could examine it better. Curt could clearly see the rawhide throng that looped tightly around the holster tip and disappeared through a small hole in the leather. The other end, he knew, would be tied tightly around the

muzzle of Thorben's sixgun, behind the front sight where it wouldn't pull loose.

A door slammed and Mina Thorben appeared on the porch. Both men turned their heads to her. She was looking at Curt, her eyes pleading with him.

Curt swung his head around, seeing again the tight barbed wire on the fences, the board corral behind the barn. The place had Thorben's stamp. It would keep it even when the man was dead.

Suddenly Curt felt that he was a lucky man. Had his aim been better Thorben would've died. The woman and the ranch would have become his. For how long, he wondered, before he walked out of the house some day to find a man leaning against the barn, waiting?

He holstered his gun. It took only a few minutes to saddle his horse and collect his few belongings from the bunk room. They watched him climb into the saddle.

The rancher still stood in a defiant attitude. The woman's eyes were pleading, and her lips trembling.

"She's your woman, Thorben," Curt said. He waved his hand to include the house, barn, stock—everything he'd thought he wanted.

There was no answer. He turned his horse and spurred it in the direction of town.

OLD UTAH'S UNHITCHING MACHINE

IT SEEMS that Reno, Nevada, has acquired quite a reputation as a place where you can get a divorce in a hurry. A few weeks and it's all over with. But Reno is as slow as molasses compared to an unhitching device used by a town called Corinne, Utah, some six decades ago.

If ever a town deserved to be called a "slot-machine" divorce place, it was Corinne. In fact, that's how you got your divorce—through a slot machine!

The machine was located on the street outside of the office of the law firm of Johnson & Underdunk. It looked something like a coffee roaster, except that it had some slots at the top. These slots were made to receive silver half-dollar pieces.

If you wanted a divorce, all you had to do was this: Go up to the machine and deposit five fifty-cent pieces. There was a sort of banging noise and a drawer opened, like a cash register will do. In the drawer there it was, your divorce decree—signed, sealed and delivered.

You had merely to affix your own signature to it. There was also a blank where you could fill in how much alimony, if any, you intended to pay.

Corinne was wide open, a free-and-easy railroad boom town back in the 1890's, and under the laws that prevailed at the time nothing more was required to sever the cords of matrimony. However, the slot-machine did graciously serve up two sets of papers, so that if you wanted to, you could send the party of the second part a set for his or her edification and record.

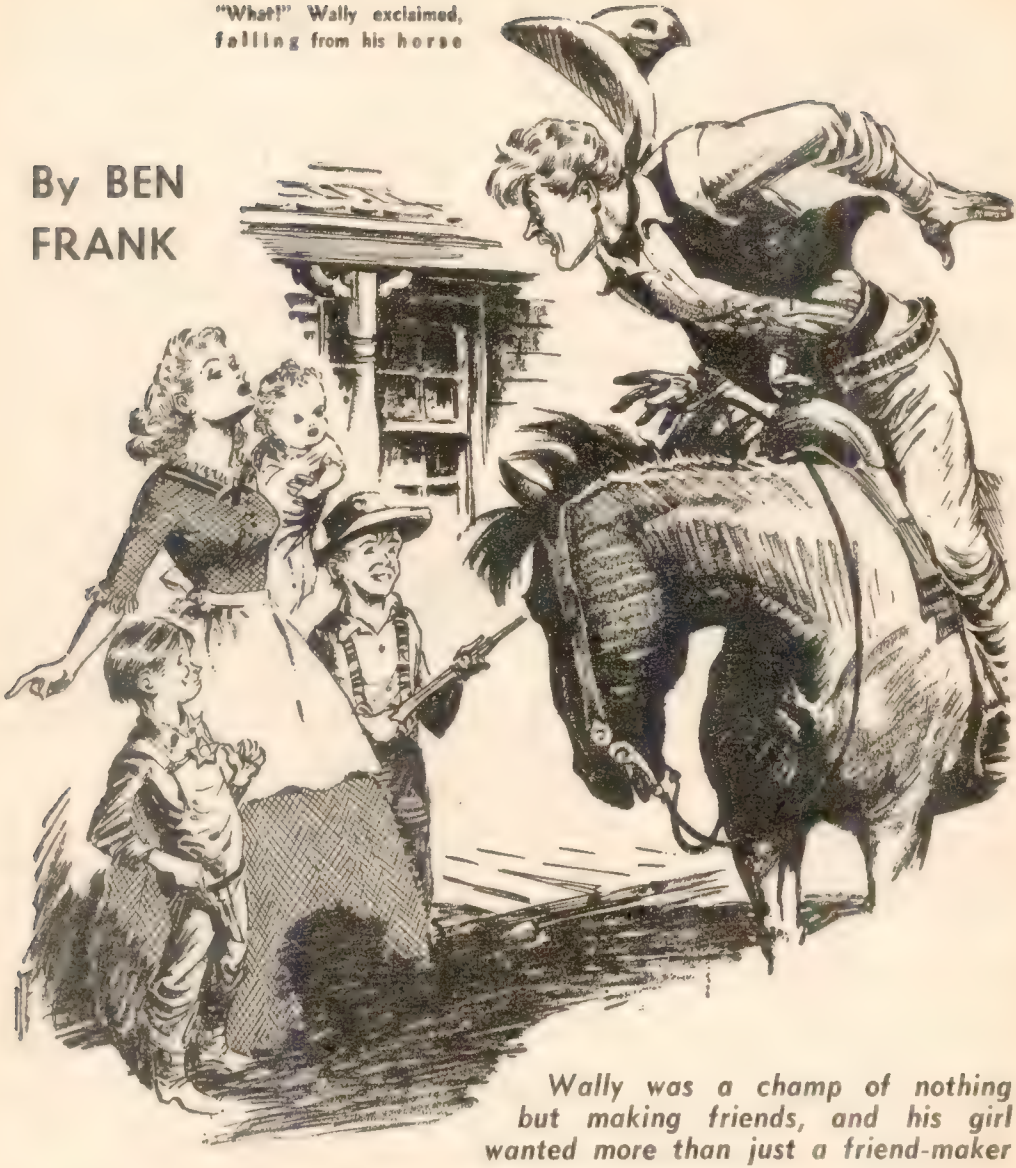
The slot-machine proved quite popular. No fuss, no bother, no courtrooms, no embarrassing questions from the judge, no waiting, no lawyer consultations. All you needed was two and a half bucks. Just five half-dollars. And it was just as legal as it could be. The decree popped out bearing a judge's signature and all the other proper legal rigamarole.

The men who thought up the slot machine, Lawyers Johnson and Underdunk, were quite pleased with the device too, which provided them with a steady, no-bother-at-all income. This lasted for several years, and no doubt they'd begun to dream of glory, when their divorce machine would spread all over, like the cigarette and gum dispensers of today, but the mean old Utah State Legislature came along and outlawed it.

—Harold Helfer

"What!" Wally exclaimed, falling from his horse

By BEN FRANK



Wally was a champ of nothing but making friends, and his girl wanted more than just a friend-maker

The Champ of Cottonwood County

ON THAT fine Saturday morning in early spring if you'd stopped to take a close gander at a certain long, lean cow nurse, you would have known right off that he was a mighty troubled young man. Grunting, he heaved the heavy saddle up onto his bronc's quivering back.

"You sure that slick-haired skunk said that, Apple-pie?"

His name was Wallington Walrath Walstrom. But fortunately few people knew it, and practically everybody in Cottonwood County called him Wally. He gave the cinch strap a jerk and glared across the bronc's rump at old Apple-pie Peck, his cook and handyman.

"Heared it with my own two ears," Apple-pie declared, spitting gustily from some place behind a faceful of ragged white whiskers. "Riff Ringle said you didn't have no business building a fence acrost Hogwash Gap. What's more, he said if he took a notion to tear it down, he'd tear it down!"

Wally snorted angrily through his long, sunburned nose. He didn't like it no two ways from Heck was a pup, this hoggish owner of the neighboring Flying R spouting off them dire words. Even if trouble with Riff wasn't exactly nothing new.

Ever since Wally had made a down payment on his Bar W two years before, young Riff Ringle had been a problem. The truth is, Wally and Riff had always rubbed each other the wrong way from the time they were kids, Riff always having plenty of money to spend, and Wally coming from a family that had to get down and scratch for a living.

"That varmint," old Apple-pie said darkly, "wouldn't be above cutting a fence."

Cussing under his breath, he hobbled back into the unpainted Bar W ranch house.

Lifting his sky-blue eyes toward the distant snow-covered mountains, Wally tried to lose his indignation in the beauty of the scene. After all, when a young man is about to visit a dark-haired, beautiful girl like Mildred Morgan, he doesn't want to be boiling with anger. But before he could draw a long breath, the rattle of a buggy caught his attention.

A GIRL holding a baby on her lap was doing the driving. Sitting beside her were two small boys. The girl's name was Hazel Porter. Her pa owned the Double O. The kids belonged to her pa and stepmother, but that didn't make no difference to a girl like Hazel. She was crazy about those youngsters.

"Hi, Wally," she said, bringing the buggy to a stop.

"Hi'ya, Wally," the two boys yelled, and the baby began to bounce up and down and hold out her arms.

Grinning, Wally stepped up and gave Pete, the older button, a dig in the ribs. He winked at little Stinky and reached up for the baby, whose name was Honey.

Hazel handed Honey over. Then she looked at the long-legged, straw-headed ranny in a way that said, You're the boy for me! But he was so busy juggling the baby around that he never noticed.

The fact is, he hardly ever took a close look at Hazel. Not that there was anything wrong with her. She had reddish-golden hair, sort of greenish-gray eyes, a handful of freckles across her small nose, and soft red lips. Not to mention a figure that filled out her clean gingham dress in a very satisfactory manner. But she wasn't no dark-eyed, dazzling high-brow like Mildred Morgan. She was as common as an old boot.

"Wally," Hazel said, "tomorrow, Mother's having a birthday dinner for me, and you're invited."

"Birthday!" Wally did some mental arithmetic. "Dog-gone, you'll be nineteen!"

He shook his head in unbelief. Didn't seem possible that she was practically a grown woman. But before he got any more thinking done, the two boys leaped down and grabbed him.

"Hey, Wally," Pete yelled, "ain't you got something for us?"

He had something for them, all right. A bean-shooter for ten-year old Pete; a wooden sixgun and a tin star for seven-year-old Stinky.

"Never, never aim that thing toward anybody," he cautioned Pete. Then he fastened the tin star to Stinky's shirt front. "I reckon this makes you a sheriff," he said, grinning.

"Will you be over for dinner tomorrow?" Hazel asked.

Wally allowed he would. Then thinking

again how grown-up she was, he had a bright idea.

"Hazel, I'm thinking about popping—asking a girl to marry me. Now, if somebody was to ask you to marry him, how would you want him to say it?"

She liked to fell out of the buggy, and her heart began to pound so hard she was afraid he'd hear it. Then she took a closer look at him and somehow knew she wasn't the girl he had in mind.

"Well, I—it depends." She swallowed hard. "Mildred?"

He nodded.

"I guess when you're in love with a girl, the right words will come."

The next thing Wally knew, Hazel and the family were rattling away in a fog of dust. Scowling, he climbed into his saddle. He reckoned she didn't know beans about this romance business. Here he was, plumb goofy about Mildred, and still didn't have no idea how to pop the question.

Riding along the rocky trail up one hill and down another, he suddenly remembered what old Apple-pie had said. The next thing he knew, he'd turned off toward Hogwash Gap.

Sure enough, he found some of Ringle's Flying R cows standing around the spring-fed water hole, looking as happy as kids on a picnic. Yelling the air blue, Wally bunched them up and drove them through the gap. And sure enough, one end of the fence was lying flat on its face.

He got rid of the cows, then took a good look at the fence. Couldn't find no proof that somebody had knocked it down, but he had his suspicions. Snorting angrily now and then, he worked it over the best he could without any tools.

FINISHED, he glanced up across the countryside. Above a distant strip of timber, he could see the upper story of the Porter ranch house. From an upstairs window, somebody could watch the fence. Only it wasn't likely that anyone would tear down a fence in broad daylight.

Got to come up here and spend a whole day, rebuilding this fence, he thought unhappily. Some time, Riff Ringle's going to push me a mite too far, and—

He let it go at that. The fact is, Wally didn't hanker to tangle with Riff. Not that Wally was exactly afraid of him, but he knew that cutting the man down to size wouldn't be no easy job. Riding on to Morgan's Slash M, he concentrated on getting himself back into a romantic mood.

When he rapped on the front door of the big ranch house, old Money-bags Morgan answered the knock. He had a big round face the color of a ripe Jonathan, and cold, shrewd eyes. But seeing Wally, he grinned and held out a hand. He kind of liked this long, lean drink of water.

"Come in, son," he invited. "What can I do for you?" He shoved Wally into his office and shut the door. "Set down and take a load off them Number Ten boots."

Wally sank into a chair that stood near the big iron safe where the old gent kept his cash.

"Well, I—" Wally stammered, "came to see Mildred."

The old gent snorted, and his face turned a shade redder.

"Can't understand that girl," he muttered. "Ever since she went to that fancy school in the East, she acts like she's the Queen of Shebia." He shoved to his feet and flung open the office door. "Go on into the front room, Wally. Likely she's in there, looking at herself in the big mirror."

Wally eased into the front room. Mildred turned from the mirror and flashed him a smile. Wally liked to had heart failure. She had on a low-cut white dress and white boots, and with that raven black hair and her soulful dark eyes and milky-white skin—well, for a minute, Wally just about went blind.

"Gee, Mildred," he gurgled, "you—you're—"

She touched his hand, sending tingles up his arm and along his spine. It was something like being struck by lightning.

"Mildred," he blurted, "did you ever think about getting married?"

"Yes, indeed," she said, her dark eyes

turning dreamy. "Sit down, and we'll discuss the matter."

Wally sat down gratefully. His legs had just about given way on him.

Mildred also sat down and smoothed her white skirt over her slim knees. She was as graceful as a pondful of swans with a background of string music.

"The man I marry," she said sweetly, "must be outstanding in some way. He must be one who has proved himself to be above the common herd. He must have some great talent. Something that sets him apart from those made of common clay. Do you follow me, Wally?"

Wally shook his straw-colored head in a bewildered way.

Her lovely face puckered slightly, she put a long-nailed finger against the point of her beautiful chin.

"Let me see—yes, I might put it this way. I want to marry a man who is a champion. You know what a champion is, Wally. A winner. A man who can do some one thing better than anyone else. Like Riff Ringle."

Wally felt a flash of anger. He opened his mouth to express his opinion of Riff, but realizing what he had to say was hardly fit for a lady to hear, closed his mouth quickly.

"Riff does so many things so well," Mildred murmured. "Like roping and cutting and riding wild broncs. One might say that he is the champion cowman of Cottonwood County."

Wally stumbled to his feet, put on his old hat and headed for the door. "Be seeing you some time, Mildred."

HE WENT out to his bronc, wobbled up into the saddle and headed toward the little cowtown of Cottonwood Ridge, his lean, brown face as full of wrinkles as a hobo's pants.

"So she wants to marry a champion," he muttered.

A half-grown calf popped up out of a bushy hollow. Wally unlimbered his lariat and made the cast. Missed. Never was much good at roping a running calf, anyway. As for riding a bucking bronc—he shuddered slightly. Last time he'd tried that, he'd landed in a cactus bed. Coiling the lariat, he tried to think of something he could do better than anyone.

An hour later, he had to admit he wasn't no champ at anything. Swimming, running, jumping, boxing—no good. Eating—there was a possibility, but something told him that being a food-consuming champ likely wouldn't impress Mildred favorably.

Scowling, he glanced about. He was riding along a stream that cut through a boulder-strewn valley. Wild Horse Valley folks called it. A rusty tin can that some fisherman had left along the creek, caught his eye. A sixgun shooting champ? Why not? He made a grab for his gun, cleared leather, fired.

The can didn't move. But something else did. Wally's bronc.

Spooked by the sudden blast, the animal leaped about three feet straight up, and Wally went sailing through the air. Which was a lucky thing, for at that very moment, an answering shot rang out, and a bullet whined through the space where Wally had been. The young cowhand landed with a tooth-rattling thud, his skull whamming against a stone.

Coming to a few minutes later, his head feeling like it was full of earthquakes, he sat up and made a search for a bullet-hole. Not finding one, he was about to congratulate himself when he saw a snake-eyed, hook-nosed little gent sitting on a flat rock nearby. This smallish hombre looked mean enough to poison a pup, and held a long-barreled smokepole in a steady fist.

"Feller," he gritted, "before I give you a hot-lead ticket to the Pearly Gates, I want to know how you knew I was hiding behind them hackberry bushes down by the creek?"

The black hole in that sixgun looked to Wally bigger than a railroad tunnel. He found his voice some place and sputtered, "Honest, I was just taking a shot at that bait can."

"Yeah?" The little polecat grinned on

one side of his hard mouth. "Why would you do that?"

There wasn't nothing for Wally to do but explain about Mildred refusing to marry nobody but a champion.

"Women!" the stranger said, his voice like a bucketful of vinegar. He angled his gun toward the creek and triggered a blast that sent the can flying in all directions. "Son," he said, holstering his weapon, "you got a honest face, and having had my share of trouble with the feminine gender, I believe you. But if you'll listen to me, you'll forget this champ-loving critter and continue your own life of single bliss. But if marry you must, latch onto some lady without big ideas."

Slowly Wally shook his head. "Mildred is the only girl for me," he declared fervently.

The stranger looked sad. "If you was a dog with a busted leg, I'd put you out of your misery. But since you're human and I kind of like you, I reckon I'll say no more and let you go."

Wally staggered to his feet, caught his bronc and rode on. The last he saw of the little man, he was still sitting on the flat rock, looking sad.

Cottonwood Ridge was asleep in the spring sunshine. Wally left his mount at the rail in front of the barber shop. Stepping up on the board walk, he was smacked dead center by a sudden idea. Feeling somewhat hopeful, he went into the shop.

"Lou," he said to the barber. "I'm kind of thinking about working up toward the checker champion of Cottonwood County."

LOU was sharpening a pair of scissors. He liked Wally. He grinned, then shook his head sadly.

"Wished I had time to play you a game," he said. "But Saturday's my busy day and—hey, Joie!"

His twelve-year-old son came hurrying into the room.

"Joie," Lou said, "practice Wally up on a checker game."

Well, Wally hadn't made a half-dozen moves before he knew he was licked. No use talking, he wasn't cut out to be a checker champion. Not when he couldn't win against a kid like Joie. He was on the verge of throwing in the sponge when a commotion broke loose outside.

"What's going on?" he asked, rushing to the door.

What he saw was little Pete Porter running along the street with old man Carrol, proprietor of the harness shop, chasing him. The old man collared Pete and began to shake him violently. Wally hurried outside.

"What's all the trouble, Mr. Carrol?" he asked.

"Trouble!" Carrol yelled. "This kid shot out my window with his bean shooter! I'll learn him to look where—"

"It's my fault, Mr. Carrol," Wally said. "When I gave him that shooter, I told him never to shoot at people. But I plumb forgot to warn him about windows. So I'll pay the damages."

Suddenly the oldster grinned and turned Pete loose. He was right fond of Wally. Always had been.

"Aw, shucks, Wally," he said. "It waren't a very big window. Let's just forget it if Pete will promise to be careful where he aims that thing."

"I'll be careful," Pete promised quickly.

After Wally and the old man visited awhile, Wally wandered on along the street. Coming to the post office, he went in.

Of course, there wasn't no mail for him. Didn't really expect any. Then, turning away from the window, he saw a dodger tacked to the wall that made him jump. On it was a picture of the little hook-nosed gent he'd met along the creek. Also, the words:

SNAKE-EYE ERWIN
WANTED! DANGEROUS!

According to the smaller print, Snake-eye had committed a number of crimes, including highway robbery, jail-breaking and bigamy. Breathing hard, Wally scurried across the street to the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Fremont Foster sat behind a battered desk, a heavy man with a flaming red mustache and a pink bald head.

"Son," he said after Wally had told his story, "it's a wonder to me that mangy coyote didn't salt you down with a couple ounces of lead. Only reason he didn't, I reckon, is that you're the kind of a boy folks naturally like."

Wally felt a new hope rising in his bony chest.

"Sheriff," he wheezed, "if I should capture this outlaw, would that make me—well, sort of a champion outlaw-catcher?"

Sheriff Foster stared at him pop-eyed. "Son, anybody who catches Snake-eye Erwin would be a champion in seven states! But" —he paled slightly— "forget it, boy. I like you and don't want you getting hurt. You just stick to herding cows and leave that little polecat to us lawmen."

Wally didn't say yes or no. But he knew he was going to keep a look-out for Snake-eye, and if luck was with him, he'd become an outstanding citizen of Cottonwood County, you bet!

Presently he left the sheriff's office and booted it over to the general store, where he purchased a supply of canned goods and a sackful of dried apples for old Apple-pie Peck. Stepping out into the sunlight, he came face to face with Riff Ringle.

Riff was tall and broad at the shoulders. Mexican silver spurs jingled on the heels of his sixty-dollar boots.

"Just met up with Sheriff Foster," he said, spreading a sneering grin all over his handsome face. "He tells me you saw Snake-eye Erwin. That you made some big talk about running him down and making a hero of yourself."

THE big fancy-pants threw back his head and liked to split his silk shirt, laughing.

"What's so funny?" Wally growled.

"The idea of you thinking you could catch an outlaw. Why, you couldn't catch a three-legged calf in a box stall if—"

"Not to change the subject," Wally cut in sourly, "but some way my fence got knocked down and your cattle—"

"You saying I knocked it down, Walstrom?"

Riff unhooked his thumbs from his silver-trimmed gunbelt and rolled his hands into fists.

Wally let it go. After all, he had no proof. Anyway, at heart, he was a peace-loving young man. Turning on his heel, he stamped over to where he'd left his bronc. And standing in the shade nearby, as if she had been waiting for him, was Hazel Porter, who had come to town to do the Saturday shopping. She and her brother, Pete.

She wasn't hard to look at, a trickle of sun tangling with her bright hair and dancing on the golden freckles on her face, the breeze twisting her skirt about her trim ankles. But Wally scarcely noticed. He was so used to seeing her around, just like part of the scenery.

"Thanks, Wally," she said, "for taking Pete's part. Of course, he shouldn't have broken the window, but—"

"Oh, I didn't do anything much," Wally said, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"Wally"—she turned kind of pink—"I —well, how did you make out, proposing to—to Mildred?"

Wally didn't mind telling Hazel the truth of the matter.

Suddenly her blue eyes were twinkling. "I might teach you how to crochet," she said. "Then you could become the champion doily maker of—" But the hurt expression on his face stopped her. "I'm sorry, Wally," she said gently. "Perhaps everything will work out fine. But Wally, you are the champion at one thing!"

"I am?" He gaped at her in astonishment. "What?"

"You—no, I'm not going to tell you."

With that, she went swishing on along the street.

Puzzled, Wally mounted his bronc and headed homeward. Him, a champion at something? He wondered if maybe Hazel hadn't been standing in the sun too long, or something.

On the way to the Bar W, he rode

through Wild Horse Valley, but he didn't see a thing of Snake-eye Erwin. By the time he reached home, he was a despondent young man.

"Son," old Apple-pie asked worriedly, "you look like a first cousin to a wake. What's a-troubling you?"

Wally gloomily explained about Mildred and this championship business.

"I might learn you how to be a apple-pie baking champ," the old man said doubtfully.

That evening, Wally gave the apple pie business a whirl, doing exactly what the oldster told him to do. But instead of that pie turning out the mouth-melting way the old cook's pies always did, it came out of the oven looking like it had been made of sawdust, old boots and a smattering of burned cork. Tasted like it, too. Later, old Apple-pie Peck took it out and buried it in the back yard.

"Looks like I'm a plumb failure at everything I try to do," Wally sighed.

"You're young and healthy," the old cook said, hoping to cheer him up. "You own a ranch, even if it has got a mortgage on it. And I reckon you got more friends than you can shake a stick at."

But mere words couldn't cheer Wallington Walrath Walstrom that night.

SUNDAY morning, on the way to help eat Hazel Porter's birthday dinner, he rode into Hogwash Gap. The propped-up fence had fallen flat on its face again, and some Flying R stock had crossed over to the water hole. Wasn't much sense in driving Ringle's cattle out of the gap until he'd properly repaired the fence. Scowling, he glanced off toward the Porter house.

An upstairs window reflected the sun like a mirror. If Hazel or somebody was up there, looking out, she could see him. He took off his big hat and waved. Then almost tasting Mrs. Porter's good cooking, he kicked his bronc into a canter.

The two Porter boys came piling out of the house to meet him. Stinky wore his tin star and had his wooden sixgun stuck in the bib of his overalls.

"Don't start no trouble," he said. "I'm the sheriff."

"Watch me!" Pete yelled. He lifted the bean shooter and let fly at a tin can sitting on a stump. Hit it dead center. "I picked up some little chunks of iron at the blacksmith shop, yesterday," he said. "Shot a squirrel this morning."

Just then, Hazel came to the door. She was as pretty as you'd want a girl to be, but Wally hardly noticed. He borrowed the bean shooter and a chunk of iron and took a careful shot at a tree. Missed it a good two feet. Sighing dismally, he went on into the house to say hello to Jeff Porter and the missus.

"Nice to see you, Wally," Mrs. Porter said, and she really meant it. She liked Wally. She knew how Hazel felt about him, and since she loved this grown-up stepdaughter like she was her own girl, she hoped that Hazel would somehow manage to snare Wally. "I hope you brought along a good appetite," she said smilingly.

Jeff Porter laughed and slapped Wally on the back. "Why," he said, "this boy is hollow clear down to his toes."

"As hungry as I am, they must be hollow, too," Wally said, stepping over to the crib and giving little Honey a gentle poke in the ribs.

The dinner was just as good as Wally had expected it to be. Just as they were finishing up, Mrs. Porter said that she and Jeff were going to visit her sick sister over in Marion County tomorrow. Then in the same breath, she said they sure hated to leave Hazel and the kids alone.

"But we simply can't take the children," she added.

"Don't worry about us," Hazel said.

"I'm going to rebuild my fence in the gap tomorrow," Wally spoke up. "I'll keep an eye on your upstairs window. If you need anything, Hazel, just hang a sheet out the window. Won't take me long to get here."

Mr. and Mrs. Porter looked vastly relieved. And so did Hazel.

"Likely she won't need you," Jeff said. "But it'll be nice to know you'll be handy."

Wally didn't stick around long after dinner. Let on like he had to get back home. But the truth was, he wanted to take another ride through Wild Horse Valley. He still had hopes that he might be lucky and become the champion outlaw-catcher.

He had hardly got out of sight of the Double O when he met Riff Ringle. And riding close beside Riff was Mildred Morgan, wearing a big white hat over her coal-black hair and watching Riff with her soulful dark eyes. Poor Wally would have sneaked off into a side trail if Riff hadn't spotted him.

"Hey, Walstrom," Riff called, "I want to talk to you."

Wally pulled up and waited for them.

"Just rode through the gap," Riff said, giving Wally a hard-eyed look, "and saw your fence is down. If you've got good sense, that's the way you'll leave it!"

Before Wally could decide just what was proper to say in the presence of a lady like Mildred, they rode on. Grinding his teeth in rage, he headed toward Wild Horse Valley.

WALLY decided he might as well have stayed at the Double O and played hide-and-seek with the Porter kids. At sundown, he gave up his fruitless search and returned to the Bar W. That night, he was so troubled he hardly slept a wink.

Early Monday morning, he loaded some tools and his lunch in a gunnysack, straddled his bronc, and rode to Hogwash Gap. First thing he did was to glance across the landscape toward the Double O ranch house. No sheet hanging from the upstairs window. So he set to work.

It wasn't no easy job, putting that fence back into first-class shape. The day turned hot. Driving a staple, he batted a thumb. Wiping the blinding sweat from his eyes, he snorted and cussed. If Riff Ringle wasn't so danged hard to get along with, there wouldn't have to be no fence here.

"I ought to pop him on his big fat nose!" he muttered.

Pretty soon, he began to get hungry. He was thinking about putting on the feed bag when a clatter of horses' hooves came to his big red ears. Straightening his aching back, he saw Sheriff Foster and half a dozen riders come charging into the gap. Among them were Riff Ringle and Jim Bean, the Slash M foreman.

"Wally," the sheriff bellowed, "you seen anything of Snake-eye Erwin this morning?"

"No," Wally admitted, feeling a tingle along his spine. "Why?"

"The low-down son has gone and done it again," Foster roared. "Sneaked over to the Slash M this morning, found old Money-bags Morgan alone, busted him over the nogging and emptied his safe."

"Somebody see him?" Wally asked hoarsely.

"Riff saw him riding away from the ranch," the sheriff answered. "Snake-eye was heading for the mountains."

"As luck would have it," Jim Bean spoke up, "I ran across Riff right after he'd seen the outlaw. We started to head him off from Eagle Pass, then met up with the sheriff and his men."

"Me and the boys had decided to take a look for Snake-eye this morning," the sheriff explained. "Didn't have no idea he was still in this part of the country, but—say, Wally, if you still want to help catch the varmint, straddle your horse and come along."

This, Wally knew, was likely his one chance in a lifetime to help capture an outlaw. Maybe, make a hero of himself. Heart pounding, he dropped his spade and headed for his bronc. But all of a sudden, he remembered his promise to keep an eye on the upstairs window of the Porter house. Glumly, he shook his head.

"I don't know, Sheriff. You see—"

And that was when he caught a flutter of white flying from the window. Hastily, he explained the situation.

The sheriff scowled at the fluttering signal.

"In that case, Wally," he said, "I reckon

you'd better go see what the girl wants. We'll go on after that danged outlaw. Even if it don't seem kind of funny he'd ride into the mountains with all that snow still up there."

"Funny or not," Riff spoke up, "he was sure enough headed for the Eagle Pass trail."

The sheriff and his men went clattering on through the gap. Feeling cheated, Wally climbed aboard his bronc and headed toward the Double O. There was no doubt about it, fate was against him.

A few minutes later when he pulled up in front of the ranch house, he was more sure than ever that fate was laughing over his shoulder. With Honey cradled in her arms, Hazel stood on the front porch. Pete and Stinky stood beside her. Wasn't nothing wrong with them that Wally could see. Suddenly he was furious at Hazel for spoiling his chance to ride with the posse.

HAZEL said, her eyes shining with excitement, "Gee, Wally, I thought you'd never come."

"Wished I hadn't," he growled.

"But, Wally"—she shivered slightly—"we've captured Snake-eye Erwin. I thought you'd be glad to take him to the sheriff."

"What?" Wally yelled, falling from his horse.

"You see," Hazel said calmly, "I saw his picture in the post office Saturday. When he came here, demanding that I fix some food for him, I—"

"Yeah," Pete broke in. "And when he wasn't looking, I let him have one of them iron slugs on the side of his head. It knocked him out cold!"

"Then I tied him up," Hazel added, "and hung a sheet from the window."

"I arrested him," Stinky said, giving his tin star a swipe with a sleeve.

Wally sank down weakly on the porch. His head was spinning like a pinwheel. He felt like he'd stepped into a deep hole. Snake-eye Erwin captured by a girl and a kid with a bean shooter! While he, a big strong man with a loaded six-gun—

He was still sitting there, feeling kind of numb, when the sheriff and his men came fogging up from a strip of timber.

"The more I thought about all that snow in them mountains," Foster bellowed, "the less likely it seemed Snake-eye would ride into 'em. Even if Riff does think I'm a blasted idjut, I circled back and—say, what's wrong with you folks?"

Wally couldn't find his voice, so Hazel explained. Then they crowded into the front room to take a look at Snake-eye, who was hog-tied and looked mean enough to strangle his best friend.

"If I didn't see it, I wouldn't believe it!" Sheriff Foster sputtered. "Hey, wait till I take a look in the varmint's saddlebag for old man Morgan's money!"

He floundered out to Snake-eye's horse, but didn't find a cent of money any place. He came back into the house, roaring furiously.

"You gents are plumb loco," Snake-eye bleated. "I ain't robbed nobody. I'm flat broke."

"Don't lie to me!" Foster shouted. "Tell us—"

But at that moment, Hazel came in with a pot of coffee. Tagging along was Pete with a tray of cups and cookies.

"Won't you men have some coffee?" Hazel asked. "And some cookies?" She stopped talking, and her eyes whipped worriedly about the room. "Where's Stinky?"

"Stinky," Pete said, passing out the cups, "is outside, playing he's sheriff. He's looking in everybody's saddlebag for old Morgan's money."

"What?" Riff Ringle yelled. Unleathering his sixgun, he leaped to the door. "Kid," he roared, "you stay away from my—"

His voice cracked off. He spun around and found everybody staring at him.

"Wait a minute!" Jim Bean said hoarsely. "I met Riff riding away from the Slash M. Seemed in a mighty big hurry, but when he said he'd seen Snake-eye—Why, he just made that up. And since I was with him all the time after that, he

didn't have no chance to hide the money!"

"Don't nobody move!" Riff's gun was up and ready for business. "Shuck your guns and drop 'em. You first, Sheriff!"

GUNS went clattering to the floor.

"Yeah," Riff said, "the money's in my saddlebag. Rode over to the Slash M to see Mildred. Didn't think anyone was at home. Then saw the old man through a window. He had the safe open. Took off my boots, sneaked in and gun-whipped him so quick he didn't see nothing. You folks got anything to say about it?"

"Only that you're a danged fool!" Foster said angrily. "You, owner of a big ranch, going owlhoot—"

"Owner?" Riff laughed shortly. "Not the way I got it mortgaged."

"Anyway, you can't get away to save your soul, Riff!"

"Can't I?" Riff laughed again. "I got it all figured out." He stepped over to Honey's crib. "Wouldn't want to see a baby hurt, would you, Sheriff? Well, I'll just take her with me."

The coffee pot went crashing to the floor.

"Oh, no, not Honey!" Hazel cried.

Suddenly she wasn't no longer a sweet and gentle nineteen-year-old girl. She was a wounded animal at bay. She was a hundred and five pounds of fury, ready to die for that little baby half-sister, who was laughing and cooing happily because she figured somebody was about to pick her up.

In that split second before Hazel leaped at Riff Ringle, Wally lived a million years. He knew what the girl was going to do. He knew what Riff would do to her. He knew everything there was to know. Even if he hadn't no time to think things through, he knew that as far as he was concerned, there wasn't anyone in the whole world who meant as much to him as Hazel Porter did. And if anything should happen to her—

Fingers curved into claws, she went after Riff. Paralyzed with horror, Wally saw Riff's gun come up, come down in a slashing blow. He saw Hazel drop to her knees, heard her sob. He saw a trickle of blood. And then Wallington Walrath Walstrom went plumb crazy.

He lunged right into the roar of Riff's sixgun. He swung his big fists. He kicked and yelled and bit and snarled. The next thing he knew, they were dragging him off Riff Ringle.

"You don't want to cheat the Law out of having a chance at him, do you, Wally?" Sheriff Foster asked, grinning.

Half-dazed, Wally looked about. Honey still lay in her crib, laughing and swinging her chubby arms.

Hazel was on her feet. She'd wiped the blood from the tiny cut on her forehead. She gave Wally a quivery smile. She had a knot on her forehead, all right, but she was fine. And Wally suddenly felt like standing up and cheering.

A little later, Hazel said, "Wally, I guess you're a champion or a hero. Or someone mighty important."

They were alone in the Double O ranch house. The posse had gone on back to Cottonwood Ridge, taking along Riff and Snake-eye. Pete and Stinky were outdoors, playing outlaw and sheriff. Honey was smiling in her sleep, likely dreaming of all the nice things that babies, who are loved and are safe, dream about.

"I guess," Hazel said hollowly, "Mildred will think you're a wonderful man, now."

But Wally just stood there, shaking his straw-colored head. He knew who was the real champion. Hazel Porter, and no one else! And he was going to marry her if she'd have him. But maybe—and the thought scared him half to death—maybe she wouldn't even consider a common, ordinary cowhand.

"But, Wally," she said, smiling bravely, "even before this happened, for my money, you've always been the champion of Cottonwood County. When it comes to making friends, being liked by kids and grown-ups, there's no one who can top you. And I—"

That was as far as she got, for Wally had heard enough. You see, when one champion kisses another champion, there's hardly no time for talking. ●

The Shooting

Rarely did a medical officer get the chance

to be a combat leader, but Rawdon did—just

before an overwhelming attack by the Indians

Sawbones

a novelet by STEUART EMERY

CHAPTER I

Unfit for Active Service

HE LIFTED his neck scarf and mopped away the burning sweat that ran down his face, clearing his eyes of alkali dust, and pulling his left foot out of the stirrup as his horse loped along. That eased the sudden twinge of the stiff knee that had thrown him out of the Army and barred him for the rest of his life from leading men in combat.

Miles behind lay the straggling main street of the railhead town with its adobe and false-front frame buildings blistering in the mid-afternoon sun glare. That glare blurred his vision now and parched his rangy frame under the flannel shirt and old riding overalls.

Not more than a mile ahead, with plumes of dust rolling out behind its wheels, lurched the stage to the fort, with the small troop escort, carrying a single passenger—the veiled girl who had boarded it at the station deep in this land of desolation and danger.

To the south somewhere, where he could make out the distant blur of the Border's mountain masses, lay Flatnose and his murderous sub-chief brother, Twisted Ear, an ever-increasing menace to the Army. With minds as cruelly warped as their mutilated features, they were ready for rampage with their crew of ropy-maned Apaches.

An Army career as a combat cavalry officer had been all John Rawdon had ever dreamed of, and worked for as long as he could remember. The prospects for that career had been bright, had been within his reach after four years at West Point. He had done his job there superbly, well-earning his diploma and commission.

Then the slam of his horse's hoof on the top bar of the jump on the equitation ground, the stunning crash, and the pinned leg.

Diploma and commission had been

Lowering her Winchester, Carla shouted: "Don't stop! Just go!"

brought to him in the hospital by the gray-haired commandant, who had looked down on him with a terrible pity. The commandant had known that the Academy doctor would report when Rawdon was released from the hospital:

> Unfit for active service, due to permanent leg injury.

Rawdon had held his commission exactly one month, then had come the curt, impersonal War Department notice:

> Retired to inactive list. Physical disability.

Out of the Army.

Now he was back in the Army again. But there was no saber at his side, no Colts in his gunbelt as he rode toward Fort Hastings and the threat of a Border war.

HIS free hand, swinging loosely, struck against the canvas-covered warbag strapped to the cantle of his saddle. It felt the hard lumps inside it—the tools of his new trade, brand-new surgical skill.

His father, former Union Army brigade surgeon, had told him that with his Army career gone the profession of medicine was the next best thing. And as soon as he had begun to study he had found that he had inherited his father's aptitude. And then, when his new diploma had been in his hand, had come the call from the Army. Desperately short of surgeons, they had been calling for doctors from civilian life to be commissioned for frontier service.

Young Rawdon's commission had gone through. In an emergency, they didn't care if a noncombatant Army doctor had a stiff knee or not.

If Dr. John Rawdon ever saw any action, though, it wouldn't be on the firing line in command of hard-bitten troopers. He would be hidden in the shelter of some boulder or gully in their rear, with a couple of thumb-fingered medicos under him, dressing the wounded and probing for bullets, not firing them.

In the fort, there would always be the invisible barrier that separated the combat men and the noncombatants. He'd be "Doc" or 'Sawbones," a handy man to fill up a card game or lift a few whiskies with. But always he would have to live with the unexpressed pity of the others for his injury, damn their eyes!

The curse broke violently from Rawdon and he slammed iron into his mount. He had let the stage go on well ahead of him while he'd hired a horse from the livery stable back at railhead. The escort sergeant had directed him to the stable, and had thrown in a fast drink to ease the depression that had ridden Rawdon.

He cursed again as his mount stumbled in stride, and began to falter. The horse he had picked out was a hoof-knocker, or else had become lamed on a hidden stone. A lamed horse had to be lightened of the rider's weight if it wasn't going to be worthless. But there was the stage to ride for, dead ahead.

The escort of eight troopers, a sergeant and a corporal, turned their heads as Rawdon loped up, and he didn't like what he saw. Half of the escort obviously were raw recruits, awkward and uneasy, and the noncoms and other veterans looked staled by years of heat and hardship.

Rawdon called, as he rode up: "Tell the driver to pull down, Sergeant. Hitch this horse to the boot. He's thrown a tendon or something."

Dismounting, he turned the handle of the stage door, opened it, and climbed into a seat beside the girl. With a whip crack and a yell from the driver the heavy vehicle lurched forward.

The heat in the coach was stifling, the smell of old leather clogged Rawdon's nostrils. The girl had dropped her veil and her smooth, oval face was a surprise in its loveliness. Her eyes were a deep, soft violet.

"Oh!" she said.

He said awkwardly, "Lieutenant Rawdon, detailed to Fort Hastings. Ah—er—" He felt like a fool, at a loss for words. "Horse went lame, so I've hitched him on behind. Riding in civvies to save my uniform."

"Oh," she said again and he was conscious that the violet eyes were studying him, making a frank estimate.

He knew what he looked like, alkali-coated, roughly-garbed and sweating, as he knew that his face with its squarish jaw and blunt nose was nothing to impress a girl. And in the first instant of their meeting this girl had made a definite impression on him.

She raised her hand to adjust her veil and it was bare of rings. Well, at least she wasn't some young officer's wife.

"You—your—relatives in Fort Hastings?" He cursed himself for his clumsy approach.

"I'm Carla Myles, Lieutenant Rawdon," she told him. "My father is Major Frederick Myles, retired. He came on a month ahead of me to look into buying the trading post at the fort. Captain Alan Fentriss, the executive officer, thought it would be such a good buy he took out a five-hundred-dollar option on it for Father."

Captain Alan Fentriss. Where had Rawdon heard Captain Alan Fentriss' name before? Somewhere, somebody had been talking about him, and that recently. The low-ceilinged, noisy officers' mess at Department Headquarters came to mind, and the portly medical captain who had taken Rawdon there to wait for his travel orders.

He had been politely received at a table where young officers were sitting, and they had told him that Colonel Ives, commanding officer of Fort Hastings, was the toughest-minded Indian fighter west of the Mississippi. And they had told him—

Then Rawdon had it! They had also mentioned the Colonel's executive officer, Captain Alan Fentriss. Handsome, brilliant, moneyed, they had said, and generous to the utmost with his less fortunate fellow officers.

As one young Lieutenant had put it, "Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and swings a damned good saber."

So Captain Alan Fentriss had put up his own money to get Carla Myles' father down to Fort Hastings. And Carla with him. To any retired major, on an inadequate pension, a brilliant, moneyed Army son-in-law would be a godsend.

The interior of the jolting coach suddenly seemed an oven-hot prison. Rawdon breathed harshly.

"So—so your father has left the Army?"

"Unexpectedly," said Carla, in an odd voice. "It was his life, he loved it all, he doesn't know any other. He couldn't ever be happy away from the Army. So the next best thing was a civilian business in an Army post. I'm an Army brat myself. I haven't ever known any other life, either. Father sold the old family land in Pennsylvania and began looking for an Army post business. About six months after we met Captain Fentriss in Wyoming he was transferred here. When he wrote Father about the Fort Hastings' trader's post, Father dropped me off with an aunt in St. Louis while he came on here and closed the deal."

"So it's closed? I see."

Rawdon saw it all too clearly. Another arrangement, one for life, would be closed soon between Captain Alan Fentriss and Carla Myles. Her loveliness didn't belong in the dreary stagnation of frontier post life. She belonged in the drawing rooms of Washington, the ballrooms of Philadelphia and Baltimore. She wouldn't have to fade now in the Southwest desert heat, devitalizing her beauty and her slender figure.

He stared from the coach window toward the south, his eyes hot in the sun glare. Dust devils danced over a tawny, arid wasteland scarified by harsh, black malpais and huge, spiny cactus, the heat waves shimmering like the blasts from a furnace. Captain Alan Fentriss could get her out of all of this.

"I'm sure you'll like Captain Fentriss," said Carla. "And my father."

"I'm sure to like them both," Rawdon assured. "If your father was retired for any kind of physical disability I'll be glad to give him special attention. I've studied up on some pretty modern methods of treatment, and I might be able to get

him a re-examination."

"Treatment?" Again surprise rang in the girl's voice. "What kind of an officer are you?"

"Medical Corps. I'm a doctor."

"Oh!" For the third time the same exclamation broke from Carla. The first time it had had surprise in it, the second time comprehension, but now it carried disillusion and sudden coolness.

"What's wrong with—"

"You can do nothing for my father that will help him. You'll never be able to get him back into the Army. He hates Army doctors with every drop of blood in him. He'll hate you on sight."

"What?"

SHE said evenly, "My father was wounded in both arms in a fight with the Cheyennes two years ago. The Army contract surgeon who attended him was drunk. He took off my father's arm. And he took off the wrong arm."

"Good God!" Rawdon sat mute for a moment, shocked. Then he murmured, "Yes, such things have happened. But when we get to the fort, maybe—"

"I'm afraid there won't be any maybe. You can't know the depth of my father's bitterness. Thrown out of the only career he cared for, in the prime of life. I'm all he has left. I'd do anything to bring some kind of happiness and mental ease back to him. I'm desperately worried about my father. He's had a terrible smash and—"

"And?"

"Never mind." Into her eyes came the shadow of something that looked like fear. "It seems strange somehow to find out you're a doctor. So you've never led men in battle?"

"No, and I never will."

Suddenly depressed, Rawdon leaned toward the window and once more stared at the waste of sun-scorched desolation. Every flaming dawn out here bred danger, in every blue-black, white-starred night loomed the menace of Apache destruction. It was everywhere, silent, invisible.

And now in one terrified breath of time, it leaped into visibility, not two hundred yards away!

"Sergeant!" he shouted. "Apaches!"

CHAPTER II

White Man Strategy Versus Red

RAWDON'S shout came too late. From behind a cluster of boulders where the long-maned Indians had been lying flat, they had risen with leveled rifles, and they had their targets marked!

A crashing fusillade exploded, centered on the men with the broad yellow, down-pointed chevrons on their sleeves. The sergeant and the corporal pitched from their McClellans into limp heaps on the sand. These Apaches knew their business. With their first burst of fire they had knocked out the noncoms, and left a group of troopers with no officer in sight!

But there was an officer they couldn't see.

"Carla," cried Rawdon, "get on the floor and stay there! Driver, pull down!" Brakes screeched on as the lieutenant flung open the door and leaped to the sand, body and mind acting instinctively. The escort was milling uncertainly, shocked and leaderless, and his command crashed into them:

"Dismount! Hitch horses to the stage's back wheels! Form firing line . . . Here they come!"

The Apaches behind the boulders were firing steadily. Then out of the depths of the desert a rash of mounted Apaches erupted, rushing up over the lip of a hidden arroyo. Instantly Rawdon realized that he had to break this charge in a single blast of gunfire or it would overrun the startled defense. The troopers lay prone on the sand, carbine stocks pressed to shoulders, faces tight-drawn. They had recognized the voice of command, they would obey this new officer.

"Hold your fire until they pass that big rock!" Rawdon ordered them.

The Apaches tore on, wave after wave, fierce and deadly with their open mouths and writhing coppery faces. One second, two seconds, three, Rawdon waited. Then he gave the order, his own Colt jumping in his hand in answer to the bullets that lashed past him.

"Fire!"

At that range not even the rawest recruit could miss. In a crashing blast the volley ripped into redskins and horseflesh. Ponies crashed to earth, and a welter of dead and screaming wounded Apaches littered the ground. The storming waves of savages broke into twin streams that rushed past the stage while a fast roar of gunfire poured into them, and out onto the desert where they formed up well out of range.

Rawdon looked along his firing line and met the hard grins of the veterans, and the sickish but game smiles of his rookies.

"Good work, men!"

Not one of the troopers' haltered horses had been touched by Apache bullets and the stage teams also stood unharmed in their traces. That meant the Apaches were out to get the horses, so did not want them hurt. Flatnose must need mounts badly for an all-out war.

Rawdon studied the Indians, who were yelling their rage out on the wasteland. More than forty of them still left—against ten whites.

An overtall brave with a yellow headband raised his hand. Half of the Indians slid from their ponies and began to creep toward the stage, dodging behind boulders that strewed the desert. The mounted warriors raced in a wide circle back to the north and pulled down five hundred yards away.

Rawdon sensed the Apache strategy then. The creeping braves would get close to the stage and whittle down its defenders, then the mounted redskins would overcome the last few men in an overwhelming rush.

"Who's the oldest private here?" Rawdon called.

"I am, sir. Closkey is the name." A powerfully-framed older man with an aggressive air raised himself on his elbow. "I been a corporal."

"Then you're my noncom. You know the names of these men. I don't. Listen to me, troopers! We haven't a chance against numbers unless we outguess those braves. They plan to cut us down, one by one, and rush the last survivors. So we're faking heavy casualties. Closkey, bring the dead sergeant and corporal in under the stage, and pick out two other men to play dead, and lay them there also. Pick up three fake wounded men and load them into the stage. That leaves four of us and the driver on our feet, and we'll play dead and wounded in turn, too. Then we'll rise in our own Judgment Day. Get the idea?"

"I get it, sir," said Closkey and barked orders.

FOUR bodies went under the stage, the living men sagging limply between their bearers. The stage door closed behind the fake wounded, lax and sagging, also.

"What do I do, mister?" called the shaggy driver, rifle in hand.

"You surrender for us when I give the word."

"And what do I do?" Carla called from the stage window. She looked strained, but cool.

"You stay on the floor of the stage out of sight. You know what Indians are like when they catch sight of a white woman. They can't have seen you yet. Get down."

Even as she disappeared from the window firing from the dismounted Apaches to the south began in a ragged battle. Bullets whipped into the side of the coach and flung up spurts of sand.

"Form firing line, kneeling," ordered Rawdon. "So they can see you drop."

He swung up onto the stage's boot and clambered to the roof where he had a clear view in both directions. The mounted Apaches to the north still held off,

screeching threats, but the creeping braves were coming closer, firing more steadily.

"You two men on the flanks, fake hits and fall dead!" yelled Rawdon. "Closkey, drag them in under the stage!"

"Come along, boys," grunted Closkey and manhandled the limp frames. "It is like a Bowery saloon bouncer luggin' the drunks."

Yells of savage triumph rang out as the Apaches saw the defending line thinned by half. Closkey and the remaining trooper now stood erect, firing.

"Down, you trooper!" shouted Rawdon. "Drag him in, Closkey, then fall yourself."

Closkey hauled the trooper beneath the stage, clutched at his chest as more bullets drove and fell flat, gripping his carbine. Rawdon loosed a last shot.

"Up with your hands, driver! Yell surrender!"

He slid down the back of the coach to the sand, ripped his knife out and slashed the halters of the tied horses. Striking them on their rumps with his gun barrel and kicking at their sides he sent the loosed mounts into a panicked run, headed south.

He swung to the saddle of his own mount, a perfect target for Apache bullets, in an apparent try for a getaway. Lead whisked past him and he went out of saddle, flat on the sand, twitching realistically.

With his hands in the air the driver bellowed, "We give up—we give up!" in atrocious Spanish.

The shooting by the creeping braves ceased, the mounted Apaches shrieked in victory, but they did not move. On the desert the startled horses ran here and there, kicking up the dust, and suddenly the braves behind the boulders were up, chasing after them. Every nerve in Rawdon strained to the breaking point as he stretched out with the hot sand bruising his cheek. He'd pulled off the crowd to the south, he'd split the enemy into two separate sections, but if the mounted Apaches didn't come on—

A woman's figure broke through the door of the stage and leaped to the ground. Carla Myles, unveiled and hatless, her hair hanging loose down her back in a bright, disorderly cascade. She was running around beside the stage-coach in small, panicky circles, screaming:

"All dead—all dead—all dead!"

A fierce shrieking burst suddenly from the bunched Apache riders as they saw the white woman. Instantly they leaped into action, tearing for the stage in a tight mass.

"Closkey—troopers—get ready!" called Rawdon.

"Ready, sir!" Closkey called back.

Rawdon judged his distance. More than twenty Apaches were coming hell-bent for what they thought was a defenseless stage and an unprotected white woman. And he had ten carbines to hit them with!

They were a hundred yards off when he yelled, "Come to life! Rapid fire! Down, Carla, down!"

The bodies under the stage broke into sudden motion. Crouched behind the wheels, the "dead men" began shooting hard and fast. Carbines jutted over the window sills of the stage, blasting. On the sand lay Carla, with the defenders' lead slashing over her.

CARRIED onward by its own momentum, the Apache rush could not stop. It came on furiously, with its edges blown away, and then the heavy and accurate fire tore its center apart. The torn remnant of the shrieking Indian charge swirled past Rawdon.

Lifting his .45, he took a snapshot at the wild-eyed brave who wore the yellow headband, tall on his pony as he raced by. Rawdon had already identified him as the leader of the attackers. A snip of hair blew off the Apache's mane, streaming out behind him in the wind of his rush, and Rawdon glimpsed the withered remains of an ear that had once been sliced off close to the head.

Twisted Ear, the brother of Flatnose! And his face showed his murderous,

foiled fury.

Twisted Ear galloped on, yelling to the dismounted Apaches among the boulders who now held the captive cavalry horses.

Hardly more than thirty braves remained now, after the ambush, and they were faced by a tough group of troopers under a leader who had showed he knew how to lead.

For minutes the screams of Twisted Ear and his braves went on furiously, then they mounted their ponies and, driving the extra horses ahead of them, they headed for the far purplish blur of the Border.

"They won't even follow us and harass us, Closkey," said Rawdon. "Any casualties?"

"Troopers Hall and Morelli have light wounds."

"Send them to me. That's a doctor's job. Lash the dead on the stage roof." He turned to Carla. "You—well, you were splendid. You took a terrible chance."

"I had to take it," she said quietly.

"I'll have more to say when we get to the fort. Right now we'll have to load up the stage with the men, and it'll be a tight squeeze. I'll be riding topside with the driver and the casualties."

"You—you were hit yourself?" she asked anxiously. Her eyes dropped to his knee. "You're limping."

"Just an old injury that gave me a bit of a stiff knee. I never even give it a thought."

He lied as casually as possible, because Carla Myles was not the kind of girl a man would want to lie to.

CHAPTER III

The Man Who Had Everything

AHEAD LOOMED the pointed log walls of the fort stockade. Through the open gate Rawdon saw the baked stretch of the parade ground, with the colors drooping in the last of the afternoon heat at the top of the flagstaff by the blistered wooden Headquarters building.

He'd been through combat but he remembered nothing about his sensations except the desperate urge to shoot and shoot and get his Indians before they got him. Now reaction from strain gripped him and he felt limp and mentally inert.

As the stage rolled through the gate a bronzed young lieutenant, with the sidearms of the Officer of the Day, called to him:

"Straight through to Headquarters, Dr. Rawdon, and report to Captain Fentriss."

Rawdon nodded. He'd given a curt explanation to the galloper who had ridden out from the fort as soon as the stage with its horseless escort had been sighted, and the galloper had taken the report back. Captain Fentriss was an executive officer who wasted no time.

In the stables, cavalry horses stamped and snorted, the farrier's sledge clashed on anvil, noncoms barked and cursed. The smell of forage and leather came to Rawdon. Around him moved the life of a fighting post in which he was doomed to be a noncombatant. His teeth gritted and the taste in his mouth was bitter.

He knew now that he could command men in combat, but he'd never have the chance again. He knew now that in one short meeting a driving impact had been made on him and his life by Carla Myles, and he'd never have a chance with her, either.

The brakes screamed on before the Headquarters porch and Rawdon climbed to the ground. The coach door opened and Carla stepped out, her eyes shining with anticipation.

"Closkey," said Rawdon, "get the casualties taken care of. Then dismiss the men to barracks."

He turned to speak to Carla but she had slipped past him on running feet. A gray-haired civilian of powerful build stood on the porch, his empty left sleeve pinned up halfway. He had a broad, strong face, stamped with authority, but

it was an authority of the past.

The bloodshot eyes, the flesh creeping into jaw and cheeks, the tiny purplish veins on the jutting nose, told Rawdon, the doctor, of the onset of self-inflicted deterioration. Career lost, confidence in himself going, ambitionless except for his daughter, Major Myles was one more good officer who had taken to drink as a refuge in his bitterness.

Rawdon had in his casebook too many examples of that. Myles had had two years of it since his retirement. If something didn't happen to break Carla's father out of it—

"Carla!"

"Father!"

Major Myles had her in his good arm. The stump of his other arm hung at his side.

"This is Lieutenant Rawdon, Father," Carla said. "He saved the stage." She drew herself out of her father's embrace.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Rawdon," said Major Myles. "Thank you for what you did for my daughter."

"She saved the stage as much as I did," put in Rawdon swiftly. "I'll explain all that before Captain Fentriss."

"He asks that we come in immediately." Myles gestured with his one arm.

They went through the outer office where a stout, balding sergeant-major sat, and into an inner room. A young-looking officer there rose instantly from behind the home-made pine desk.

"Carla! It's wonderful y o u g o t through!"

So this was Captain Alan Fentriss, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and who swung a damned good saber. Broad-shouldered and lean-hipped, long in the fork like a true cavalryman, aggression and confidence were in his clear gray eyes. His features were regular and splendidly shaped, there was decision in his firm mouth, and a gay recklessness in the tilt of his head. Courage and charm were in his looks, strength in his voice.

"And I want to thank you, Dr. Rawdon," he said, "and welcome you to Fort Hastings."

Fentriss' hand was out, his grip was firm and friendly. Rawdon couldn't help liking the man on sight, couldn't help admiring him and having confidence in him. Fentriss was everything Rawdon had heard him to be at Department—a brilliant young officer destined surely for success and gold braid.

"Now that we've had the good luck, Dr. Rawdon, let's have the bad luck." Fentriss' intelligent face shadowed. "Your full report, please."

"It's worse than you think," said Rawdon quietly. He spoke as briefly as possible but every detail was clear. "It was Twisted Ear I saw, leading the Indians from ambush. And he did it in broad daylight."

"A daylight attack means Flatnose is in the open at last, starting his war," Fentriss said soberly. "Your bad news, Dr. Rawdon, puts the capstone on the bad news we've already had here. Colonel Ives took two full troops out of Fort Hastings early yesterday and rode for the reservation in answer to an emergency wire from the Indian agent that the Apaches there show every sign of a general outbreak. I'm left here in command of the post with a single troop, plus a ragtag and bobtail of garrison troops. Colonel Ives believes in smashing trouble at its source, and so do I. Right now the source of trouble seems to have shifted from the reservation to this area—Orderly!"

Fentriss' pencil raced across a pair of field message forms.

"Tell the Signals corporal to wire these immediately to Colonel Ives and to Department Headquarters." The soldier bolted out and Fentriss sat back, frowning. "Inside the hour Colonel Ives and Department will know Flatnose is out and threatening this area."

"And maybe this post." Rawdon hardly realized he had spoken.

"Yes, Dr. Rawdon, maybe this post. I'm alerting it at once for defense. In the meantime I'll have the orderly show you to your quarters for a rest, and I'll send for you when I want you. I'll be up to my neck in work." He made a courte-

ous gesture of dismissal. "Carla, will you wait a moment? I have some news for you."

"My papers," said Rawdon, and laid them on the desk. "Assignment to this post and service record."

Fentriss nodded and, with Major Myles ahead of him, Rawdon passed through the door and closed it behind him. Myles stared at him, a terrible bitterness in his expression.

"Army doctor, it seems, Lieutenant Rawdon, not a combat officer. I'll thank you again here and now, anyhow. We live outside the post. We're not apt to see much of you."

He was still the officer and gentleman but the old hatred of all Army doctors in him would never be eradicated. He wasn't going to ask Dr. John Rawdon to his home, for every time he saw Dr. Rawdon it would throw his mind back to the drunken, imcompetent Army medico who had wrecked him. The mental barrier between them would be unscalable.

"You owe me no thanks, Major Myles," Rawdon said stiffly. "Any officer present would have taken over those leaderless troopers. And your daughter saved herself and us along with her. That panic-stricken act of hers I described brought on the Apache charge. Otherwise the mounted warriors would have held back, and we would have had them coming at us all together from both sides."

Myles' face lightened. "That's very possible, Doctor."

It was what he wanted to think, for he didn't want to feel under any obligation to Rawdon. Without another word he stalked to the porch, shoulders back.

Rawdon looked around for the orderly who should be back from the Signals shack. Slowly the door to the inner office, loose on its catch, was swinging back, and he could see Carla and Fentriss standing by the desk. The officer was leaning toward her, his handsome face aglow.

"Yes, Carla." Rawdon caught Fentriss' words clearly. "The order came yesterday. Transferred to Washington the first of next month for training in staff and Intelligence, after five years of combat service. I've always been more or less of a shark at the books, and there'll be examinations for various posts. There's one coming up in a year for military attache abroad. Paris, London, the other big cities of the Continent, and I already know several foreign languages. I think I can make that grade, Carla."

He could and he would, Rawdon knew. Before Carla Myles, daughter of a major forced into the life of a post trader in dreary frontier garrisons, Captain Alan Fentriss was opening a vista of luxury and travel and social triumph.

Caught by a breeze that wandered through the open windows, the door slowly swung to and clicked, leaving Rawdon staring at blank, blistered wood. It was as though the closing door had shut Carla Myles out of his own life for good.

He walked dispiritedly out onto the porch and found the orderly just back from Signals.

"Can you show me to my quarters, Orderly?"

"Yes, sir. This way, sir."

They passed a big, log-walled building close to Headquarters, one which had a wide door and plenty of windows. Rawdon gestured toward it inquiringly.

"Officers' mess and club, sir. All the conveniences."

Yes, the officers' mess next to Headquarters had all the conveniences. Through the nearest window Rawdon saw Major Frederick Myles at the bar counter with a glass and a full bottle set in front of him. He was pouring a double shot of whisky into the glass and the way he lifted it told everything. Carla's father hadn't traveled more than twenty yards from his daughter before craving had hit him.

Carla Myles, lovely and young, deserved far more from fate than life with a slowly deteriorating father in heat and dust and boredom and anxiety and danger. With Alan Fentriss, she would get it.

But John Rawdon's feet dragged heavily as he plodded on to his quarters. . . .

It was hours later when Rawdon, resting his elbows on the gritty window sill of his adobe quarters, stared into the blue-black desert night in which myriad brilliant white stars seemed to be pressing close over his head. A cool night wind played on his face, relaxing him. He had stripped and bathed and slept through the early hours of the night, but brooding depression still had a grip on him.

The challenge of the gate sentry jerked him into alertness. He caught the flicker of a white dress as the guard stood aside, then a girl was moving up the parade ground toward Headquarters. Carla Myles coming to see Fentriss, who would now be chained to his desk for hours.

Impulse swelled in the medico to go out fast and meet her, to stop her and talk to her. But she passed quickly in through the lighted door of Headquarters and he turned from the window, dispirited.

He stopped abruptly. She was coming out again and making for the steps that led to the lookout tower on Headquarters' roof. Then her slender white shape stood limned in the moonlight on the tower platform, alone under the stars.

Rawdon dropped off the old flannel dressing gown he had wrapped about himself and flung into the first clothes at hand—his civilian riding kit, brushed free of dust and hanging on a chair. He swung across the parade ground, breath tight inside him, straight to the foot of the tower steps.

"Carla!" he called softly. "Carla Myles!"

CHAPTER IV

Ragtag Defenders

CARLA MYLES turned and looked down at Lieutenant Rawdon over the railing. Her face, in the moonlight, looked ethereal.

"Yes?" she asked.

"It's Rawdon. You have to wait for Fentriss, don't you?"

"Yes. He wants to take me over to meet some of the officers' wives at Mrs. Lieutenant Kane's. But he can't get free from his work for awhile yet. It's cool up here."

Rawdon's blood surged in him. "May I come up until he sends for you?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes." He started to put his foot on the first step, but it never got there. What he heard then left the foot suspended in mid-air.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The challenge of the gate guard rang out again, and then through the opening drove a man on horseback, quirting hard. The horse was traveling on its last strength, flanks laboring, and it was staggering in stride. It just about made Headquarters as the rider yanked it down and plunged into the building.

A sharp exclamation came from inside, Fentriss' voice barked an order, and the Headquarters bugler bolted out onto the porch, raising his trumpet. The brassy notes of Officers' Call traveled over the post.

"That takes me in, Carla," called Rawdon. "More bad news."

He went fast. In the inner room, Fentriss stood staring with concerned eyes at a big-boned man with a dusty beard and lined face—the rider who had just arrived. Rawdon could see at once that this rider was not a man to panic easily, for he was a hard-bitten frontiersman. But he seemed near to it now, and Captain Fentriss' own face was gray. Then through the door a pair of officers came hurrying.

"Lieutenant Kane, Lieutenant March—good!" Fentriss nodded. "Now listen hard to what Rancher Stevens here has to say. Flatnose and Twisted Ear have hit his spread, not twenty miles from here!"

"I'll say them damn' red devils hit it!" grated Stevens. "They come from nowheres and fired the barn. There stood Flatnose, that chunky, barrel-chested

chief of the copper bottoms, plain as day in the light of the fire. And his bean-pole brother, Twisted Ear, right beside him, egging the devils on. By plain good luck they didn't hit the house first, so I had time to get my wife and the littlest kids out the back along a gully into the brush and send my fifteen-year-old son Billy riding hell-for-leather down the valley to warn the other ranches. There was two horses in the lean-to back of the kitchen. I took the other and come galloping for this fort to warn you."

"Old Flatnose in person leading the raid?" Fentriss was astounded. "And Twisted Ear with him? How many Apaches in the crowd? And were they mounted, Stevens?"

"Sixty, seventy Injuns maybe. All on ponies. They went for my horse corral bang off the reel. They got about forty head I was gathering for sale, and about thirty head of cattle from my beef pen."

"Ah! And every ranch between yours and the Border has horses. Seventy Apaches is a big force for a livestock raid. Probably all Flatnose can mount at one time. He's raiding for horses to mount the rest of his crowd and the braves he expects to break out of the reservation. If we only could hit him now and knock him off, with Twisted Ear!"

Fentriss' brows drew together and Rawdon could tell that that brilliant, disciplined brain was racing. Fentriss raised his head sharply as a corporal hurried in through the open door.

"Well, Signals Corporal?"

"This, sir." The noncom held out a telegraph form: "Message that started to come through from the reservation but broke off from wire trouble. I've brought all there is to it."

Fentriss took the sheet and read it aloud:

> Captain Alan Fentriss
> Officer Commanding
> Fort Hastings
> Reservation rising broke out in full force today and—

"From Colonel Ives at the agency," Fentriss said grimly in the silence that had gripped the room. "That's all, and that's enough! The agency braves have cut the wire. Heaven knows how many hundreds of bucks are streaming south from the reservation right now to join Flatnose. If they can join him and he can mount them, all hell will break out along the Border!"

"All hell on horseback is blazing down Green Valley right now," said Stevens. "Listen!"

CARLA MYLES' clear voice was lifting from the lookout overhead. "Captain Fentriss! Fire! Fire!"

Then deeper voices, men's voices, picked it up.

"Fire! Fire! Watchtower Southwest, this is! Fire due west!"

Fentriss thrust his head out the window. "Carla! Spot that fire! Look directly west over the warehouse next the stockade wall and call down what part of the warehouse the fire lines up on."

In only a moment more she called down, "I have it! It's dead center!"

Fentriss came back to the desk. His eyes were bright with decision.

"I know the layout of the ranches in Green Valley, Stevens," he said crisply. "That's the Jenner spread we've spotted now. Flatnose is moving straight down the valley for the Border, picking up his horses and cattle and burning the ranches one by one! It's such bad, broken country for the last ten miles, though, that he can't drive horses fast over it, and his stolen cattle will slow him down to a walk."

"You're plumb right, Cap'n," growled Stevens. "But what's the diff'rence if he travels at a walk? Who's to stop him and his damn' Injuns?"

"The troop of cavalry that's in this fort!"

"Sir?" exclaimed Lieutenant Kane, startled. He had made no comment before.

Fentriss frowned at him as he declared, "I'm familiar with the terrain in this area. There's exactly one gap—Broken Wheel Pass—within fifty miles of the Border

wall wide enough to drive a herd of horses and cattle through. And Broken Wheel Pass is due south of Green Valley, just over twenty miles from here. I'm taking H Company, the only troop left in this post, and traveling that twenty miles, fast! Flatnose, I figure, will reach the pass about dawn—and in the dawn we'll ambush him, seventy troopers against seventy Apaches, and end his damned war with a single smash!"

Rawdon broke out—he couldn't help himself, "The fort, Captain Fentriss? Left stripped of troops?"

"Colonel Ives took a calculated risk when he took two troops to the reservation," Fentriss said grimly. "He's failed up there. Now I'm taking a calculated risk to win down here. Do you want to let Flatnose and Twisted Ear and their stolen horse herd go scotfree through Broken Wheel Pass and have every buck who's jumped the reservation join them? If we can knock off Flatnose and Twisted Ear those agency bucks will be horseless, leaderless and unarmed. They'll have to give up!" Fentriss' jaw set in a hard line, and he swung around. "Lieutenant Kane, tell the bugler to sound Boots and Saddles. Then you and Second Lieutenant Marsh form up the troop."

The two lieutenants swung out of Headquarters, and the next moment Boots and Saddles split the night. Lights flashed on in the barracks and buildings, hoarse voices shouted. The sleeping post burst into instant life.

Fentriss and Rawdon stood alone in the room, and Fentriss was measuring Rawdon with level eyes.

"You command the post now, Dr. Rawdon," he said.

"What?"

"You'll be the only commissioned officer in it when I hit the trail. Colonel Ives took the quartermaster and the ordnance and supply officers with him for extra officers. You've had combat training at West Point—I checked your papers—and you've shown you know how to lead men in a fight. So you're it. You're not a doctor any more. You're a combat officer in command of a fort until I get back."

"Yes, Captain Fentriss." A sudden thought struck Rawdown. "Major Myles?"

"Outranks you, but he's retired. Barred by the regulations. Also—" Fentriss cut the words off, but Rawdon knew what they would have been. Alcoholic. "You can take over the CO's desk right now." The captain moved to the window. "Still up there, Carla?"

"Yes," her voice came down to them. "We're taking the field. I'll come up for a moment."

FENTRISS strode out of the office and Rawdon heard his boots going up the lookout steps. He and Carla would be alone in the moonlight and Rawdon knew the question that Carla was going to be asked to answer before they parted. Alan Fentriss was going off to battle and Rawdon knew well enough what Carla's answer to him would be.

Lieutenant Rawdon took a nervous step or so about the room and a low, ironic laugh broke from him. Post commander of a stripped fort, commander of the ragtag and bobtail troops who would be all that were left behind. In combat harness for about six hours—until Fentriss returned.

Uneasiness swelled in him and became a black foreboding. Through the open window he could see H Company, formed in route column now by the fort gate. He heard First Lieutenant Kane's voice call:

"Ready to go, Captain Fentriss!"

"Yo!" shouted Fentriss, and then there was silence from above.

Rawdon could tell what was happening. Carla's lips would be pressed to Fentriss' lips, her slender, pliant body crushed to his. Then Fentriss' boots came clattering down the steps, and his orderly brought his horse around the corner of the building. He mounted and galloped hard for the gate to reach the head of the troop.

"Column forward, yo!"

The column swung in behind him and pounded out of the gate onto the open

desert, racing for a rendezvous with Flatnose. Slowly a dust plume drifted out behind it and vanished in the night. Rawdon could hear Carla's light tread coming down the lookout steps.

"Carla, will you do something for me?" he called.

"I'm coming."

Then she stood framed in the door, eyes shadowed with anxiety. But why shouldn't she be fearful? Rawdon asked himself. She had just sent the man she loved out to battle.

"Will you ask your father to report to me here, to help out? Tell him what's happened. Tell him to report in full uniform. If he's asleep, please wake him."

"He—he won't be asleep," she said hesitantly. "He's shut himself up in his office, going over the books."

The uneasiness in Rawdon mounted. The kind of books that Major Myles, locked in his office, would be going over would gurgle when tilted. Carla raised her hand to brush a lock of hair from her forehead, and Rawdon saw the golden flash of the seal ring that hung loosely on her forefinger, far too large for any other.

He had a ring like that, himself. A West Point class ring. Alan Fentriss had asked his question, and he had received his answer.

CHAPTER V

Apache Raid

THE DESERT breeze had faded and a stifling oppression, instilled by heat and anxiety, swamped Rawdon. The old foreboding was back and deepening. He looked up from his desk, half-dreading what he expected to see as Major Myles came in. The major was in his officer's uniform which now was so tight for him that he had had to leave the top button of his tunic undone. Rawdon, too, was in full uniform which the orderly had brought from his quarters.

"Major Myles reporting to the post commander."

Myles saluted, his figure erect, the veteran back in harness. His hair still dripped from the cold water into which he had plunged his head. His eyes were bloodshot, but they did not waver, although the faint reek of whisky was on him. He must be able to carry a tremendous amount of liquor, thought Rawdon, but a few years from now when the whisky rot had set in—

"Carla has told you of the situation?" Rawdon asked, and when Myles nodded, Rawdon went on, "I hope the whole thing is a false alarm, and that I've disturbed you for nothing, but as acting post commander I'm behaving as though we were facing an attack. I want your help and your advice as an experienced Indian fighter."

"I am at your service, Dr. Rawdon, in any capacity. You are the post commander."

"Here's the list of our strength from Sergeant Major Ritter." Rawdon passed over the paper. "About thirty able-bodied, trained troopers for a fighting core and another twenty or so civilian rifles. Suppose that wire breakdown isn't up at the agency as Captain Fentriss judged, but that the Apaches have cut the wire right outside this fort? Where are Flatnose and Twisted Ear right now? Where is the main force of Apaches Flatnose is supposed to have?"

"You never know where Apaches are until they hit you."

"What will happen if the Apaches should hit this fort with its handful of defenders?"

"We'd be overrun in fifteen minutes."

"Do you think I'm an unnerved fool, Major Myles?"

The major said, apparently with little concern, "Fentriss took a chance he had to take, Dr. Rawdon. This post has been left virtually undefended for only the latter part of the night and a couple of hours of daylight. And Apaches almost never attack at night. The situation is

dangerous, but it isn't at all uncommon. We'll sweat out a bad night and that's all, I hope."

"I'm praying that will be all, Major Myles. But I don't dare overlook any possible contingency. Here's a plan of the fort I've drawn up from what I've seen with my own eyes, and what Sergeant Major Ritter told me." He laid the map on the desk between them. "We can't hold the walls. The only possible bases for defense I can see are this Headquarters building and the officers' messhall next door."

"That's right," said Myles. "And this building is tinder-dry. The first half-dozen Injun fire arrows would make a furnace of it. Any of us in it would have our choice of roasting or running out and being shot down. The officers' messhall is built of logs, with an adobe tile roof. If we abandon this Headquarters the Apaches can creep into it from the north side and pour their fire right through the messhall building's windows from twenty yards away. If we burn this building down or blow it up, one charge in force will land at least a dozen Apaches flat against the walls of the messhall where they can't be shot at. They'll scale the walls at the corners, tear off the tiles and shoot us down inside like rats.

"In the meantime their main force, naturally, will have established itself in these two warehouses on either side of us." Myles touched the spots on the map. "One near the stockade wall east and the other west, raking us between them. They'll take us apart with rifle crossfire through those barred windows, and lose their fire arrows in perfect safety from inside the warehouses.

"As a young shavetail, I was once in a fort attacked by Comanches. That's the way Injuns invariably operate—rush the walls if they're defended, and the first Injun over the wall opens the gate. They pour through in force, take cover in the nearest buildings and smoke out the defense before their final rush. Flatnose, through his spies, will know the inside of this post like the palm of his hand."

"So they've got us if they come?"

"They have."

RAWDON'S head jerked. From the north gate sounded the bark of the sentry, and the thudding of hooves followed fast.

"Major Myles," he said, "I think this is it."

Closkey shouldered through the door and pulled up, breathing hard. "Closkey!" rapped Rawdon. "What is it?"

"Cap'n Fentriss sent four of us out, one on each side of the fort, posted as vedettes after dark. I drew the north side, hid my horse in a cleft between two big flat boulders and lay flat on top of one of 'em. Half an hour ago one hell of a load of Apaches begun to trickle past me on ponies. Then Flatnose showed up."

"What?"

"Flatnose is out yonder, three miles from the fort, with at least a hundred and fifty braves. Looks like he's waiting for still more to join him. Me, I got the hell out in a long detour when the clouds hid the moon, and I'm damn lucky to get here with my hair on."

"You are, Closkey." Rawdon turned to Myles. "There it is, after all. The raid down Green Valley to lure the last troop out after Flatnose. Flatnose letting Stevens see him deliberately, and get away with the news. Fentriss and H Company by now are waiting for Flatnose in an ambush that'll never take place. Those stolen horses and cattle will be driven off somewhere else, while Flatnose has joined his main force out yonder to hit this fort. And we'll never get a messenger through to Fentriss! Flatnose will have the fort surrounded so no one can get out, even if we had the time. Flatnose will know what force we have left."

"An Apache always knows everything, Dr. Rawdon," said Myles. "This time, I think, Flatnose won't wait till daylight. Shortly he and his redskins will be inside those warehouses, shooting at us. When he burns this fort every Apache between here and the Gulf of Mexico will join him."

Something tore at Rawdon's brain. "What's inside these warehouses Flatnose will use for cover once he's in the fort? How are they filled? I remember them as buildings like barns, each with a big double door on a track at either end."

"That's right." Myles nodded. "They're much too big for the stock of forage and other Army supplies that are in them. In fact, they're so big you could damn well drill a platoon of cavalry in them."

"Drill a platoon of cavalry in them, Major Myles?" Rawdon came erect. "Then those warehouses are not our weakness! As I see it now, they're our strength! And we'll lead from that strength. —Here's the core of my plan. We'll thrash it out together. . . ."

It did not take long to explain the plan—nor did they have long to wait for the time to carry it out.

A shout broke through the grim silence that had settled down over the fort.

"Apaches! Here they come!"

The roar of carbines slammed from the south gate as the alarm broke.

Standing on the porch of Headquarters with Major Myles beside him, Lieutenant Rawdon felt the strain that had been building in him unendurably harden into savage resolve. He had done all he could, he had given his orders and seen to it that they were carried out. Now the test was on!

"Apaches this way, too!"

At the north gate other carbines crashed. Flatnose had launched his two-way rush a little more than an hour after he had first brought his killers within striking range of the fort.

"All wall guards, back!" Rawdon's voice rose in a shout of command.

The guards leaped to ground, raced for the officers' messhall and disappeared inside. The big parade ground was empty, bathed in the brilliant white sheen of the moon that made it almost as light as day.

"The first step," said Rawdon. "In the next few minutes we'll know everything."

"Or we won't be here to know anything," said Major Myles grimly. "For a doctor you command well, Rawdon. And you plan well."

"I was a West Point graduate and a cavalry lieutenant before I was a doctor."

"What's that?"

"Is this any time for explanations? Look! Coming over the south wall like so many rattlesnakes!"

ONE INSTANT the pointed tops of the stockade logs were bare, the next, lithe figures were swarming over them and dropping off the firing platform. They darted to the gate, worked on its heavy bars, and the gate swung wide. An insane screeching began as through the opening rushed the mass of Apache riders.

"They're through the north gate, too," Myles said coolly.

"Open fire!" called Rawdon over his shoulder and from the windows of the wooden Headquarters building the carbines flamed. Gunfire struck hard, and Apaches went off their ponies' backs in a chaos of savage whooping.

"Now they know where we're holed up, Major Myles."

"Right. There they go for cover!"

North and south, Flatnose's riders were splitting and taking cover in the dense shadows along the walls, moving at top gallop for the warehouses. Shots began to crackle, and lead slapped into the walls of Headquarters. But the shooting so far was at random.

"Inside, Major," said Rawdon. "Take command on the west."

Troopers crouched at the windows of the outer office where Rawdon stopped, and in the inner room. Most of them might be overage and soft from garrison details, but they knew how to shoot and this time they were shooting for their lives. They were firing at riders racing out of sight, swallowed up in the black gaps of the open warehouse doors. Rifle shots began to rattle out of the warehouse windows, far across the open parade.

"Flatnose in the warehouse on this side, Major!" called Rawdon.

"He's in over here," came Major Myles' voice from the inner room. "Get ready

for some hell to break, Rawdon!"

CHAPTER VI

When Hell Breaks

IT BROKE in darting lances of flame that soared out of the warehouse windows on both sides. The plunk of the fire arrows into the roof and against the walls of the building sounded unceasingly. In a steady stream the flaming arrows carried the distance and struck into their target, their fire licking greedily at the dry wood.

"The roof's on fire, Rawdon."

Major Myles stood in the connecting doorway. Smoke blew in through the windows of the outer office, the heat in the room was becoming a searing torture, and overhead and along the walls the crackling mounted. Rawdon's whole body seemed to be drying up, roasting. Coughing shook him.

"Keep on firing, men!" he called hoarsely. "We stay as long as we can."

"That won't be so damned long," said Myles.

A rush of air like a furnace blast filled the room. From overhead a section of the roof gave way and fell in flaming wood and embers. The troopers gasped and choked, but they kept on shooting. Flatnose must think that the entire strength of the defense was pinned in the blazing Headquarters building. In minutes more the whole place would be a gigantic torch in which no man could live.

"Break, men!" shouted Rawdon. "We've done all we can here." He moved to the window facing the officers' messhall. "Sergeant Major Ritter," he barked, "open your fire!"

A carbine volley erupted from the messhall as Rawdon's troopers dropped from the windows of Headquarters. Even by the light of the flames that were leaping into the sky they were only fleeting targets. They jumped for the messhall windows, and hands pulled them in.

Rawdon came last, dropping heavily to the floor as he tumbled over the sill.

At the windows, under the direction of balding Sergeant Major Ritter, more troopers were firing, as also were the teamsters and other civilians, and the women of the fort. The room was crowded with defenders, and from beyond the partition that walled it off from the officers' mess proper, came a heavy stamping and more firing.

"So far Flatnose has attacked as you said he would, Major," Rawdon told Myles. "He burned Headquarters first, and now—"

"This way! They're charging!"

The cry came from Carla Myles, standing by one of the windows giving onto Headquarters. A Winchester was in her hand and powder grime was across her forehead.

Around the sides of the Headquarters building, using its flame and smoke as a cover, rushed a full score of Apaches!

"Bring 'em down!" yelled Rawdon, and his troopers poured in their fire.

Here and there Apaches fell, but flung themselves to earth at the base of the messhall, out of line as targets. It seemed only seconds later when Rawdon heard the noise they made on the tiled roof overhead.

"They've taken the roof, Major, just as you said they would!" Rawdon shouted to Myles. "So now we use our own strategy." He raised his voice. "You men have your orders! Follow me!"

He plunged through the partition door into the big main room, now stripped of furniture. A tile fell in front of him, and up above him a rifle barrel jutted through the hole made, leveled at his chest. He wasn't going to have time to fire! But behind him a shot exploded, the Indian's rifle dropped through the hole, and there was a thud as the redskin's body hit the roof tiles.

Rawdon jerked his head around—to see Carla lowering her Winchester.

"Carla!"

Her face was a mask of tenseness. "Don't—don't stop to say anything! Just go!"

"I'm going!"

IN THE stripped room the cavalry mounts stood side by side in an orderly, close-packed formation, with their horseholders. The horses stamped nervously, they tossed their heads, but they stood still. They were veterans of many a fight, they knew gunfire and smoke, and they waited for their riders.

Rawdon's voice bawled an order:

"Mount up, men! Open up that door! First platoon, forward, yo!"

The wide door swung open onto the parade ground. Rawdon crouched low over his horse's neck as the mount walked swiftly out. Behind him came a platoon of fifteen mounted troopers, each with two Colts at his gunbelt. The guards at the door passed lighted torches to the last file.

"Good luck, Rawdon!" shouted Major Myles, moving forward at the head of the second platoon.

"Good luck to you on your side, Major! . . . Charge!"

Covering fire slammed from the messhall at the warehouse where half of Flatnose's force suddenly saw what must have looked like a charge of madmen coming. At a gallop Rawdon took his men in a wide circle that would bring them out at the end of the warehouse where the huge, open door loomed. Driven from the windows by the firing from the messhall, Flatnose's braves had hardly time to loose more than a few shots before Rawdon and his column tore for the door and burst into the long, dirt-floored warehouse crammed with Apaches and ponies. Loose hay and boxes had been piled against the inside walls.

"Fire!"

Rawdon's revolver jumped in his grip, and behind him his yelling troopers emptied their cylinders at the gallop. In through the mass of Apaches the column slashed, knocking over braves and ponies alike in a welter of falling bodies.

"Throw the torches!"

The two troopers of the last file flung their blazing brands, the column's gunfire blasted a path, sabers were out and slashing. Rawdon blew a pair of Apaches out of his way as their lances thrust at him, he felt bullets tear through the cloth of his tunic. In seconds he lived through an eternity of shock and battle. Then he was plunging through the far door into the moonlit open.

"Slam that door!"

The last two troopers flung themselves from horseback and put their shoulders to the huge door. Groaning, it moved on its tracks and slammed shut. Rawdon stormed on, heading his column for the door of the opposite warehouse. Far down the parade ground he saw Major Myles, riding with his reins in his teeth, taking his own platoon away from the warehouse the veteran had just charged through on his own side, and was now racing them to bottle up the end of the building Rawdon had just left.

Rawdon reined down his platoon, facing the door Myles had charged through, the only exit from the warehouse now, and at the other building Myles and his men covered the opening there. Flame leaped in the interior of the warehouse where Myles' torchmen had done their work. The loosely piled hay blazed fast, going up in flame and smoke. Through the smoke Apaches darted toward the door which Rawdon was covering, and as they bunched there his troopers fired hard and fast.

"Surrender!" yelled Rawdon.

Apaches rushed out, shooting, and the troopers sitting saddle ploughed them down. Inside, crazed Apache ponies were running mad, kicking and screaming, and knocking down the milling braves. When the flash fire of the hay burned out, the smoke it would leave in both warehouses would be suffocating.

The screeching began to lessen and Flatnose's braves began to straggle out, blinded and choking, incapable of fight, weaponless hands in air. Rawdon motioned them to the stockade where they

stood sullenly, half strangled, and nursing their wounds. The battle at that warehouse was over.

Yelling and shooting were still going on at the other warehouse, though. Major Myles, on the flank of the troopers, was directing their fire into the building where resistance continued.

THEN, in another sudden rush, a wedge of Apaches ripped out through the smoke that veiled the door and drove at the line of blue. They had mounted their ponies amid the smoke and flame and were storming the thin platoon in a desperate try for a breakout that could give them victory at the last moment.

Myles sat rocklike in his saddle, his saber out, his empty sleeve flapping against his side. Toward him the redskin rider in the lead hurtled his pony, his lance levelled. Every ounce of his savage strength was going into that thrust. The lance drove violently forward, Myles' steel flicked and the thrust was parried.

The next instant Myles' blade moved lightninglike, and as the Apache rushed past, he was impaled on it. He reeled on his pony's back and the thong at its hilt ripped the saber from his run-through body and broke it free to dangle from Myles' wrist. Slowly the Indian toppled and hit the sand, spread-eagled.

Through the roiling cloud of powder smoke from the gunfire of Myles' platoon only a stray Apache or so showed. The defenders of the fort had blown the rest of the charge to pieces.

Rawdon looked at the shambles, and ordered:

"When these prisoners can breathe and walk, Closkey, herd them into the beef pen and make them sit on the ground." He drew his sleeve across his dripping forehead. "About all that are left must be out by now."

"Shot out, burned out and smoked out, sir," said Closkey. "They smell like singed cougars."

Rawdon went at a trot for the end of the other warehouse where Apaches were filing out in surrender. That charge had been the final upflare of real resistance. He pulled up at Myles' side.

"It worked, major. The surprise merry-go-round charge worked."

"It did," said Myles. He slipped the stained blade of his saber back into its scabbard. "Where have you been all these years, Lieutenant Rawdon?"

From the roof of the mess hall the last of the raiders were dropping and making for the walls. Here and there other Apaches fled. Perhaps a score of them were running out the gate. But that did not disturb Major Miles.

"The battle's over, Rawdon," he said.

Rawdon pointed to the body of the Indian lying on the ground, with the saber wound gaping under the breastbone. The body was short and barrel-shaped, but the expression of the dead Apache's face still was one of primitive power and intelligence. The nose was a wreck, smashed flat against the face.

Rawdon drew a hard breath and looked up.

"Battle's over, Major Myles. The whole damn war is over. That's Flatnose you got!"

CHAPTER VII

They Come Into Their Own

WATCHTOWER call reached Rawdon in the officers' messhall which had been turned into a temporary headquarters. "Troop column coming! North gate!"

Already the new dawn had blazed over the desert and found him wearily attending to the details of the backwash of battle. Somehow Fentriss must have made a circle in his return from Broken Wheel Pass, and was coming in from the direction of railhead. And Rawdon, smoke-grimed and bone-tired, could do with some relief.

He moved to the door, with Major Myles

beside him, and looked across the parade ground, past the smoking ruins of Headquarters. In minutes the column galloped through the gate, a tall, erect officer with graying mustache in the lead.

Rawdon stared in astonishment. How had this man with the colonel's insignia got there? The colonel flung himself off his lathered mount in front of Rawdon.

He rumbled, "Headquarters burned, beef pen full of Apaches, an attack on the fort repulsed. Where is Captain Fentriss, and who are you?"

"Lieutenant Rawdon, Medical Corps, post commander in the absence of Captain Fentriss who rode out to ambush Flatnose and Twisted Ear. But Flatnose pulled a surprise attack on the fort."

"Inside, and we'll sit down. When that telegraph wire went out while I was up at the agency I suspected the worst." Colonel Ives glanced at the interrupted telegram Rawdon handed him. "Yes, that's the start of the message on the rising. The rest of it should read 'and was put down immediately. Am on my way back to Fort Hastings with cavalry by rail.' Infantry sent by Department pulled in in a special train right after we broke up the rising. I loaded up the troops and horses and we traveled under double head of steam all night back to railhead and rode hell-for-leather from there. Now, your full report please, Lieutenant Rawdon."

"Major Myles and I—" began Rawdon and gave a detailed report, with Colonel Ives following every word. He finished, "And so that's the way it worked out."

"Troops coming from the south!"

Again the sentries gave the call.

"That'll be Fentriss, Lieutenant Rawdon," said the Colonel. "Tell me about yourself before he arrives. Just why are you medical instead of combat?"

"Not by choice, Colonel Ives."

The Colonel's eyes never left Rawdon's face as he spoke. At its conclusion, the Colonel fell into a brief silence. Rawdon, looking past him through the window, saw the head of Fentriss' column coming in the south gate. Fentriss halted, snapping orders, and his troopers hustled a tall Apache wearing a yellow headband, and a group of prisoners into the guardhouse. For a moment Fentriss pulled his horse aside and a slender girl appeared beside him. Carla was talking rapidly and as Fentriss leaned down her hand went up to be clasped in his.

"Captain Fentriss is back, Colonel Ives," said Rawdon. "He's taken Twisted Ear prisoner. Here he comes, fast."

Fentriss came in, his face taut and aware. He saluted and stood stiffly before Colonel Ives, bracing himself like a man who expects a blow to fall.

"You got Twisted Ear, Fentriss?" asked Ives. "In ambush as you planned?"

"Not at all in the way I originally planned, sir. There never was an ambush. I sent a strong force of scouts out ahead to cut across Twisted Ear's retreat far north of the pass and follow it down, unobserved, to be sure he didn't turn off en route to Broken Wheel."

'That was far-seeing, Fentriss."

ENCOURAGED, Fentriss explained, "Twisted Ear did turn his horse drive, almost due west, miles from Broken Wheel Pass. But my scouts spotted the change in plan in time and brought me word before our main force had reached the pass. So I swung hard over, caught Twisted Ear and his crew and the livestock holed up in a big ravine, and we hit them hard. The Green Valley raid was a lure, I realize now—I've been told what happened here, sir. I have no excuses for jeopardizing the fort, leaving it open for Flatnose's real attack."

"I'm not asking for any excuses, Captain Fentriss. You did a fine job in capturing Twisted Ear, Lieutenant Rawdon did a magnificent job in defending the fort, and Major Myles killed Flatnose. Which is all Washington will care about.

"With Flatnose and his force wiped out, the next danger spot is in the Dakotas where, I've been notified, the Indians are ghost dancing. I figure that I'll be there with Lieutenant Rawdon within about six weeks. Okay by you, Rawdon?"

"Sir?" That was jolted from Rawdon.

"Hell, Rawdon, I want you with me. I'm sort of the official trouble-shooter out of Washington until the Indian wars are over. I can have my pick of combat officers. And I want you as a combat officer first, and a sawbones second. If the gold braid in the War Department won't give you a new physical rating I'll simply use you as a combat officer anyhow on special service. It's been done before."

"Ah!" said Rawdon joyously.

"I'm afraid the Army can't reconsider Major Myles here for a rerating but—Myles, have you ever thought of a headmastership or chief military instructor's job at a first-class military school? They're always writing in to the War Department to recommend retired officers to them. I can damn well recommend you."

"I never thought of that," said Myles.

"Well, I have. The man who killed Flatnose will have his pick of any school he wants. Fighting seems to agree with you, Major. You look like a new man."

He did. From Major Myles' face the look of frustration had gone, and Rawdon knew it wouldn't come back. The set of his jaw was firm, his facial structure seemed to have hardened under the too soft flesh, his eyes were clear. An old war horse had come back into harness, and had been rejuvenated by battle. Ex-Major Myles had his self-confidence and his pride in himself back. The hand that had driven a saber through Flatnose wouldn't be reaching for a corkscrew.

The colonel suggested, "You might go over to the guardhouse and see if you can get anything out of Twisted Ear for me, Major. You speak Spanish, and some Apache also, I understand."

"Certainly, Colonel Ives."

"You're off, too, Lieutenant Rawdon. How are your casualties?"

"Only five men badly hit or cut. They're resting easily in the hospital."

"Then do some resting yourself."

Rawdon started for the door after Myles, and Fentriss stepped forward, his hand out.

"Thanks, Rawdon." Frank admiration was in his voice and a smile cut his bronzed face. "You're a good man to have around. The shooting sawbones."

RAWDON suppressed an exclamation at the strength of Fentriss' grip. His hand met something hard that hurt. On Fentriss' hand there was the glint of gold again. The West Point ring. A little numbly he walked onto the porch.

"I'll be going back to the cottage after I've had the session with Twisted Ear," said Major Myles. "Care to drop over for dinner with us tonight, Rawdon?"

"Ah—er—" Rawdon got out.

She stood at the end of the porch, waiting. Now she came forward to him as Myles strode away.

"Carla!" Rawdon blurted. "That—that ring of Fentriss'. You gave it back to him? Why, you and he—"

"He asked me to keep it for him while he went into action. He killed an Indian once up north who was wearing a West Point ring as a trophy. He didn't want any Indian ever to get his. I gave it back to him at the gate. There was never any promise attached to it."

"But I thought, Carla, that you and Fentriss—he has everything—"

Her eyes were clear and frank. "He's one of the finest men I've ever known, and he's a good loser. When he rode out into danger I was filled with anxiety, but I wasn't torn by fear. When you rode off on that charge of yours into the warehouse, I—" She halted.

"Go on, Carla," he said softly.

"I was torn by fear. The worst I've ever known."

"Things move fast out here, Carla, and I'll be going into danger again. So I'll speak quickly and straightforwardly. I'll even press you. What would you have felt like if I hadn't come back?"

"I wouldn't have wanted to live. I wouldn't have wanted to go on."

"And I don't want to go on now without you, Carla."

"You won't have to."

Her eyes met his, glowing, and he stepped toward her. John Rawdon, shooting sawbones, had come into his own. ●

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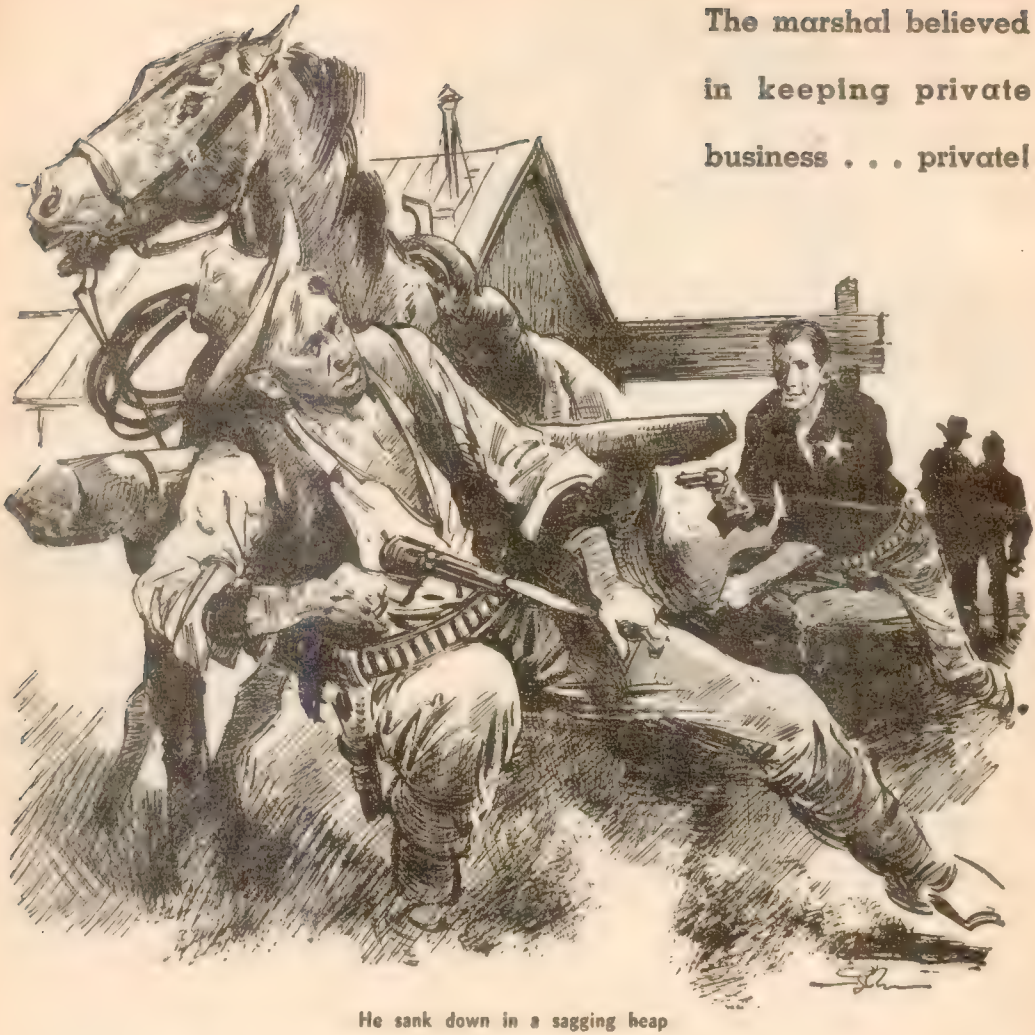

He sank down in a sagging heap

FAMILY AFFAIR

By D. S. HALACY, Jr.

THERE was no mistaking the lean stranger who swung down from the morning stage. The old sheriff met him, trying not to show the relief he felt as the marshal gripped his hand briefly. They walked to the jail and the marshal stood spread-legged by the old desk.

"You know why I'm here," he said and his voice was like the rest of him; tight and hard with no fancy trimmings to it. He was tall and his tailored shirt stretched tight across a slab-muscled chest. He moved with a deceptive quickness for his size and for a brief time, the sheriff envied the young marshal. There was strength to the face, the long straight nose and

tight slit of mouth. But it was the eyes; the set, steel-gray look in them that the sheriff was most aware of as he told the marshal the whole thing.

"There were four of them," the sheriff said, "and the postmaster went for his own gun." He paused briefly, then went on. "All the witnesses say it was Todd Blakely killed Duncan."

The marshal stiffened and sucked in his breath. A big hand closed on the sheriff's shoulder, fingers biting into the flesh.

"Who?" The marshal grabbed the sheriff's report from the desk and his eyes scanned it quickly. The paper fluttered back to the desk and the marshal's big shoulders sagged. For a full minute he stood, the tightness in his eyes gone, a hollow expression in its place. The face muscles sagged as the sheriff watched.

The sheriff retrieved the report, looking at the names he'd written down, and the realization came. He remembered now that Duncan had once mentioned a brother in the government service. He swallowed. He rose, about to say that he was sorry, but the marshal pulled himself erect and the blankness was gone from his face.

"Go on," he said, and his voice was brittle. The sheriff told him the rest. The mail sack had no money in it. By now the outlaws, holed up at the old Davis place, would have discovered that.

The marshal nodded when he was through. "I'll want a posse," he said.

THEY GATHERED at two o'clock, twenty men in the posse. The sheriff rode at the marshal's left, describing the house and the surrounding country, watching the government man fit the pieces together in his mind, nodding slowly.

It was a half hour ride to the Davis place and the posse spread out before they reached it, half of them swinging for the back of the place. There was a dead stillness when they reined up at the gate.

While the others covered the house, the marshal unfastened the gate and walked slowly up the road to the house. A hundred yards from it, he stopped and shouted.

"You're surrounded. Come out with your hands up." Throat dry, the sheriff waited for the crack of a rifle. He held his breath a long time, but when he let it out in a long easy sigh, there had been no answer from the house. The marshal walked closer.

"Surrender," he yelled. Both of his guns were drawn as he looked warily about the house. Knowing the weight on the lean lawman's mind, the sheriff could understand why the marshal risked a bullet. Strangely none came. He kicked open the kitchen door and disappeared inside and the sheriff plunged in after him, unable to hang back any longer.

Quickly they searched the house and the sheriff knew then that they were too late. There was relief in his mind. He followed the marshal from the house and they rejoined the posse.

"Any idea where they could be?" the marshal asked as they saddled up.

The sheriff shook his head. "It's a big country." His jurisdiction ended at the county line and the thought made him wonder if his feelings showed.

MID-AFTERNOON brought them, hot and sweaty, back into the town. As they came up to the jail, the sheriff turned to the lean marshal swaying in the saddle.

"What's your next move?" The answer was lost in the fusillade of shots and the sheriff twisted in his saddle to see. It was the bank, and even as he saw the men tumble from doors, the sheriff knew it was Todd and the others, determined to make a haul this time. He hadn't counted on anything like this.

A dozen guns roared as the outlaws swung up onto horses and pounded away down the street. The posse dropped two of the bandits in the first half block and one of the remaining two reined his horse to the side of the street and pulled up, hands held high in surrender. Women screamed. The last man, Todd Blakely,

the killer, kept on, low in his saddle in a vain attempt to escape.

The marshal's guns spoke, once each, and the killer's pony stumbled and fell sliding into the dirt. Todd hit and rolled in the dust, hat spinning awkwardly in the street back of him.

The marshal swung down even before his horse stopped, and as he did the killer scrambled to his feet and vaulted to the high board sidewalk toward the terrified knot of women in front of the general store. Almost as quickly, he was back in the street, a woman clutched in front of him as a shield. His right hand held a forty-five, levelled at the marshal.

"Throw it away, kid," the marshal snapped. There was steel in the voice and for a whisper of time, Todd's eyes wavered. Then they were hard and mean again.

"Go to hell!" he shouted, then flame spat from the gun and smoke puffed out with the sound of the shot.

Not breathing, the sheriff watched the marshal dive quickly to one side, sprawling in the dust. Thinking the lawman had been hit, he moved toward the fallen marshal as Todd suddenly flung the woman from him and broke for a standing horse.

Before the sheriff could fire, the marshal's gun blasted once. In crazy, nightmarish slow motion, the killer spun half around, head back as though he looked at the sky as he fell. His gun roared again as a finger twitched spasmodically on the trigger. Then he sank down in a sagging heap.

The marshal got to his feet unhurt, slowly putting up the still smoking Colt. He turned from the dead man and went straight to the jail, walking slowly, looking to neither side. Weakly the sheriff brushed at his forehead with the back of a sweaty hand. Motioning to two of the posse, he started for the fallen killer.

HE FOUND the marshal in the jail, working over his report. "The stage leaves at six, doesn't it?" the lawman asked, glancing at his watch. The sheriff nodded. "Good," the marshal said. "Telegraph this report to Leavenworth for me."

It was over now, and the man wanted to get away. He had done his job, but there was no help in it for him.

Suddenly three of the posse burst in the place, obviously drunk, celebrating the success of the afternoon. The marshal pushed up from the seat.

"I'll see you again some day, Sheriff." They shook hands and the marshal turned to go. The noisy trio stopped him at the door, slapping him boisterously on the back.

"Hello, marshal! We're drinking to a pleasant stay in hell for Todd Blakely. Have one with us!" The man held out the half-emptied bottle, blocking the marshal's way.

The lawman's hand came up fast, sweeping the bottle out of the drunk's hand. Then he was gone, striding across the street toward the loading stage for Leavenworth, a straight stiff figure in the dust.

The sheriff frowned down at the terse report the marshal had made, and then he read the signature. He half-rose, watching the marshal as he boarded the stage. He knew now what it meant to kill Todd Blakely.

The report was signed, "Travis Blakely, U. S. Marshal."

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The Indians were all converging into a single pack behind her

APACHE ALIBI

By PETER FERNANDEZ

She was as bad as she was beautiful, and she knew just what she wanted: the stagecoach payroll

WITH standards flat in the hot wind coming across the wasteland, Company D of the Seventh Regiment, United States Cavalary, under the command of Captain Hume Richardson, rode eastward away from the outpost.

Duncan swung the gate closed and shoved home the timber bolt. Swiftly he crossed the yard to the stable, his boots kicking up puffs of the dry baked clay.

Before the stopover of the coach, due from Dag City within the hour, there was much to be done if he were to reach the east a rich man.

Strangely, although the next hour would contain the most important and dangerous moments of his life, he felt icily calm.

Captain Richardson had told him that the coach was carrying ten thousand dollars in United States currency which was to be held at Fentonville for payment to the track crew when the railroad finally extended to the eastern reaches of the Sierras.

Duncan entered the stable and saddled his mount, securing the pack of provisions which would sustain him on the long trek north of the Apache villages and thence to civilization. The large sum of money would never reach Fentonville. The coach crew would be dead, and he would make it appear that he, too, had been killed. The captain would see only further evidence of Apache treachery.

When the horse was ready, Duncan left the stable with an armload of hay which he jammed into crevices along the stockade walls. He made several trips, stuffing more fodder until he was satisfied that once a flame was touched to the stuffed breaches, destruction of the post would be complete. It was hot work, and his long narrow face became streaked with perspiration and dust.

He stopped for a moment in his haste to peer through a porthole in the main gate. Across the wasteland, distorted by distance and the heat waves, he was able to see Company D just meeting the oncoming coach. Then the cavalry continued eastward as the coach, raising a thick cloud of dust, began its final charge over the barren, parched earth.

Running to the one-room stockade cabin, Duncan went to his bedroll in the far corner. From beneath it, he withdrew a long bow and five arrows. He braced his knee against the center of the bow, tightened the gut, and let it snap taut. Carefully he tucked the weapon back under the blanket so it would be in easy reach and placed the arrows beside it.

In the distance he could hear the rumble of the stagecoach. With his bandanna he mopped his face as he left the cabin and hurried across the yard toward the gate. He did not want the coach crew to notice that he had been working hard. Known for his easy ways, he was aware that signs of his exertion might arouse suspicion. Glancing again at the stuffed crevices, he satisfied himself that they would not attract attention.

The coach was near now. Duncan heaved the timber bolt aside and backed up, swinging the gate with him. The four-horse team, dust and sweat-covered, and with foam flecking from their mouths, pulled the coach slowly past him.

"Hulloo-oo," came Billy Reynolds' hoarse salute from the driver's perch. Duncan nodded to his old friend, a round grizzle-faced man with a chaw of tobacco perpetually in his cheek. Beside him was Hank Bardow, riding guard, his rifle cradled across his long, bony legs.

THE coach window was opposite Duncan now, and as it passed, he saw something for which he had been totally unprepared. Sitting in the far corner, deep in shadow, her beautiful face framed by a high-ruffled dress, was a young woman.

Billy Reynolds halted the coach and leaped down from his perch.

"Didn't think we'd be making it," he said, stretching. "Run into an Apache scouting party back in the hills and had to run for it. They was out to get us and kept pretty close for a spell. Cap'n Richardson's gone after 'em. Reckon he'll keep tracking 'em for days. They was out for scalpin'."

Duncan nodded absently, eyeing the coach. "Who's the passenger?" he asked.

Billy Reynolds slapped his thigh, "Clean forgot," he said, going to the door and opening it. Reaching inside, he helped the woman to the ground.

"Duncan," he said, escorting her over with totally alien gallantry, "this here's Miss Cora Hendricks. She's riding on to

Fentonville, where her fiancé is Cap'n Bates of Company F, the Seventh."

Duncan nodded. "Pleased, ma'am, he mumbled.

"How do you do, Mr. Duncan," Miss Hendricks said with a trace of a Pennsylvania accent.

Duncan eyed her oddly, though not unaware of her attractiveness. He saw a rather sharp oval face, honey-colored hair done up in tight curls, and blue eyes. His only experience with women had been when, as passengers on the coach, they had stopped at the outpost while the horses were watered and rested. The women had been stocky, plain individuals, taciturn and mannish, strong for the new country which was opening up. But this woman was different, and Duncan appreciated the sight of her.

He thought suddenly that with the money he was going to take he would be able to have women like this. He smiled at her.

"Have something to eat inside," he said.

"Fine," said Billy Reynolds, rubbing his hands together. "Thought we'd have to wait till Fentonville." He called the guard. "Hank, Duncan's staking us to some grub."

Hank Bardow swung down from the high seat.

Duncan led them to the one-room cabin. He stoked up the fire and soon had a small blaze. As he was stirring the left-over rabbit stew, Cora Hendricks came over and reached out to touch his wrist.

"Let me, Mr. Duncan," she said softly.

He handed her the ladle and stood back, watching her bend over the cauldron.

Desperately he tried to think of an alternative to his plan, but was unable to hit upon an idea. To fire the outpost and kill the coach crew would mean he would have to murder her, also. There simply was no other way. But his mind balked at putting an arrow into her body. He knew that to conceal his crime from Captain Richardson it would be necessary to slay the crew with the Indian weapons, but he would be unable to do that to the woman. He would shoot her and take a chance that the ensuing fire would obliterate the evidence that a white man had been the culprit.

When they were eating, he decided, would be the best time to attack them. First the two men and then Cora Hendricks. He glanced at his bedroll. At the proper time, he would flick back the blanket and silently shoot.

So unexpected would be his attack that he knew there would be no trouble. The woman would be helpless, and he could kill her at his leisure. But the men were armed, and he would have to work rapidly on them. Ever since he had acquired the bow and arrows, he had practised diligently until now he was a fair shot. The very jack rabbit which made up the stew was a victim of his aim.

The conversation of the coach crew finally penetrated his thoughts.

". . . Geronimo when he's got his hair up," Billy Reynolds was saying, "not with a whole army of cavalry. And Richardson should savvy that."

Duncan strolled over to the table at which the men were seated.

"Apache talk?" he inquired casually, thinking of his impending trek around the northside of the Indian villages.

"Something's riled Geronimo," Hank Bardow said. "Ain't you heard?"

"There was some talk of it when the troop was here," Duncan said. "But Richardson's always suspecting something."

It was more than likely that the captain was correct, but Duncan wanted to hear if there were more news of the savage tribe.

"Burned the settlement back by the ferry," Billy Reynolds said. "I ain't taking the coach through no more after this trip, less'n they quiet down some."

DUNCAN licked his lips. Even this trouble caused by the Apaches to the east was working perfectly into his plan. Nothing could go wrong and these happenings were making it more sure.

"What about you, Duncan?" Hank Bardow asked. "Until the troop comes back,

which they ain't aiming to do till they chase that scouting party to Geronimo, you got no protection. Don't you think you oughta go the rest of the way to Fentonville with us?"

"Geronimo don't bother me none," Duncan said, shrugging. "I had some of his redskins right in the stockade here with me. Sort of friendly they was." It was from an outcast of the tribe that he had obtained the bow and arrows. "I ain't afraid of Geronimo."

Billy Reynolds shook his head. "No Injun can be trusted, that's my saying. If you're smart, you'll come along to Fentonville."

"I think the stew's about heated," Cora called. "Come take a look, Mr. Duncan."

Returning to the fire, Duncan saw steam rising from the cauldron. He nodded and reached a poker in to lift the handle.

Suddenly Cora leaned close to him. "I want to talk to you alone, Mr. Duncan," she whispered so low that it sounded almost like her breathing.

Keeping his eyes from her, Duncan stood up. "Reckon you might want to wash up a bit first, Miss Hendricks," he said loudly. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you the water barrel."

The two men at the table resumed their conversation about Geronimo and his Apache warriors as Duncan led the woman from the cabin and around to the side where an alga-covered water barrel rested in the shade.

"All right, ma'am," he whispered. "What the trouble?"

A quick smile flashed across her comely face. Her voice was throaty and warm. "The coach isn't going to make it to Fentonville, Mr. Duncan," she said.

Instantly, as surprise washed over him, Duncan wondered if Billy Reynolds or Hank had somehow discovered his plan or if this woman had become aware of it through some mistake he might have made.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I heard them talking back a ways before the Apache party started after us. They're planning to head south after they leave here. There's ten thousand dollars in the coach, you know."

Duncan nodded automatically. He had been totally unprepared for her disclosure, assuming that the coach crew was honest. But they had plans similar to his!

He shook his head. "They're two against one, ma'am," he said. "And once the coach leaves here, it's out of my hands. What happens to it then don't concern me."

"Two against one," Cora repeated mockingly. "You're a better man than that, Mr. Duncan. At least, I thought you were."

Duncan was puzzled by her strange manner. If the crew were planning to run off with the currency, it would mean they would have to kill her, yet Cora Hendricks did not seem troubled by the thought.

"But it's two against them, Mr. Duncan," she went on softly. "You and me. Look!"

With a swift motion of her hands, she lifted the hem of her dress and withdrew a small pearl-handled pistol. The metal of its barrel was polished and shone like silver.

"My brothers taught me to shoot back East, Mr. Duncan," she said, a soft chuckle breaking from her. "They even gave me this gun. Now, are they going south with the coach or are you and I going to do something about it?"

Duncan thought desperately of the ten thousand dollars which, due to its temptation for the crew, was rapidly getting away from him. It would be even simpler killing the men with Cora's help, but he did not want them shot. It was vital to his whole plan that they be killed with the Indian arrows so that Captain Richardson would be thrown off the trail.

Cora Hendrick's story would provide a good motive for their deaths but it was not one which would explain his own absence. Now he had every right to attack the crew, but it would leave him no chance to escape with the money. Duncan realized that he must go through with his

original plan. It would be the only one which would enable him to escape suspicion. He decided, however, to pretend to agree with the woman.

"Glad you told me, Miss Hendricks," he said. "And I value your help. But just hearing men talk ain't proof enough. I can't do nothing 'less they actually try to run off with the currency."

With an angry gasp, Cora Hendricks stamped her foot. "What are you working in this lonely place for, Mr. Duncan?" she demanded. "Working your life away for a mizzling sum all by yourself. Don't you ever want to strike it rich?"

"What you mean?"

SHE smiled, and her eyes went to mere slits. She reminded Duncan of a cat eyeing milk or a dog worrying a bone. "Ten thousand dollars, Mr. Duncan," she said slowly. "A fortune there in the coach, ready for the taking, and if we don't take it, they will!"

"You're saying," Duncan stammered, "that you're willing to help me get that currency?"

"More than that, Mr. Duncan," Cora said. "I'm willing to share it with you. I haven't had much money in my life and I always wanted more. A captain's pay isn't enough for me. So I won't go on to Fentonville at all. Maybe you know where we could go when we take it?"

Duncan nodded, still surprised and bewildered by her. It had never occurred to him that she had planned as he had, that anyone else had thought of taking the ten thousand.

"I know," he said. "North of the Apache country."

But then he wondered how trustworthy he would find her. Perhaps after traveling until they were out of dangerous territory, she would pull that little pistol on him. He decided, though, that he would give her a chance.

Staring frankly at her, seeing how beautiful she was, he realized that if everything worked out he would have, in her, the kind of woman he had hoped the ten thousand dollars would get him.

Cora Hendricks returned his gaze boldly. "How about it, Mr. Duncan?" she asked. "Are we partners?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, "but I got it worked out how to do this, and that's the way it's going to be."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Duncan," Cora agreed.

They returned to the cabin. Billy Reynolds and Hank Bardow were still discussing Geronimo's attacks on the new settlers.

"That grub going to be ready soon?" Billy called as Duncan entered the room. "Don't want to spend more time here than we got to. Never can tell if the Apaches might be planning a raid here. Don't want to get caught in it."

"Coming up," Duncan said. "Miss Hendricks, you serving?"

Cora winked at him. "Be right happy to, Mr. Duncan," she said.

Duncan watched her set bowls on the table. Billy Reynolds and Hank resumed their conversation.

Waiting until Cora was at the fireplace and lifting the cauldron of stew, Duncan casually went to his bedroll. He was conscious that the woman was watching him, but the coach crew was unaware of what he was doing. With his back to them, he lifted the bow from beneath the blanket and notched an arrow on the gut. Drawing the weapon taut, he turned.

Cora was halfway across the room but well out of his line of fire. Duncan aimed along the arrow at a mark dead center of Billy's back. The twang of the gut and *whoosh* of the arrow screamed out in the room. Billy gasped as the shaft struck home and slumped on the table.

For a moment Hank Bardow was too surprised to do more than gape. In that time Duncan strung another arrow on the gut. As he was pulling it back, Hank Bardow was getting up, drawing his revolver at the same time.

The coach guard managed to jerk the trigger as Duncan let loose the arrow. At the same instant that the revolver exploded, the shaft struck Hank squarely in the chest.

Duncan heard the shot splinter the wall, but it had missed him completely.

Hank Bardow opened his mouth to scream, but only a gasping sound issued from him as he fell to the floor.

Slowly Duncan lowered the bow and turned to Cora. With one hand she was holding the cauldron of stew; with the other she gripped the pearl-handled pistol.

"Just in case you missed," she said calmly, "I was ready to fire this. But it was very well done, Mr. Duncan." As if nothing at all had happened, she went to the table and placed the cauldron on it. "When do we leave, Mr. Duncan?"

"Soon as we can. Cap'n Richardson might come back any time."

Duncan started for the door, but Cora's voice stopped him.

"I imagine," she said, "it's going to be a long trip, Mr. Duncan, and it might be a few days before we can have any hot food. Let's have a little of this stew first. It will do us good."

Duncan felt his stomach turn over. Two of his friends lay dead at the table at which the woman wanted him to eat. Never had he met a man more cold-blooded than she was.

"There ain't time," he snapped. "I got a fire to start. Let's go."

Her voice was suddenly sharp. "If you please, Mr. Duncan, sit down and I'll serve you. The troops have been gone only a couple of hours. To track down an Indian party could take them days. They won't be back before sundown, at least."

She began ladling the stew into the bowls.

Swearing to himself, Duncan crossed the room to the table. Carefully he averted his eyes from the two still figures—one on the floor, the other, head down, at the table.

"Maybe," Cora said quickly, "these things bother you, Mr. Duncan?" With a nudge of her elbow, she sent Billy Reynolds' body toppling to the floor. "That's better?" she asked.

Duncan sat down, feeling sick and regretting already what he had done. He toyed for a moment with the thought of killing her, too, but realized that she was a resourceful woman, as well as beautiful, and he might be needing her.

HE COULD see that the whole idea had been crazy and he wished he had not killed the crew, that things were just as they always had been, with the coach coming through the post every few days and his life peaceful and relatively safe. Even without any ten thousand dollars.

What did he really want ten thousand dollars for, anyway? In a few years it would be spent, and he would have to start all over again. He was as sick in his mind now as he felt physically. The feeling was unbearable.

Cora was hungrily eating the stew. He tried a spoonful, but every part of his body balked. He sat watching her in a kind of horrified fascination.

In a few minutes she had finished and daintily wiping her mouth on a frilly handkerchief, she stood up.

"I'm ready now, Mr. Duncan," she said. "If you put a saddle on one of the team horses, you'll find I can ride somewhat. It will make it easier than traveling two on one mount."

Duncan nodded. "I'll do that, Miss Hendricks."

Together they left the cabin and walked across the stockade ground to the waiting coach.

"The money," Cora said, "is in a chest inside."

Duncan climbed into the wagon and saw the wooden chest with the heavy leather straps and a wax seal.

Cora Hendricks stood on the step, just outside the door, watching him lift the wooden box down.

"Stand clear," he said.

When she was out of the doorway, he heaved the chest from the coach.

It struck the baked clay and with a sudden splintering sound, burst at the seams.

Duncan reached the box at the same time as the woman. Together they bent over it, Duncan seizing the lid and tossing it aside.

With a sickening start, he stared at the single piece of paper which was inside.

Cora grasped the scrap and began to read it aloud, her voice choked.

To Marshal Jameber, Fentonville,
"Too much risk in shipping payroll at this time due to new Apache uprising. Sending the chest so that the railroad track crew will not think the money will be withheld and quit. As soon as Geronimo is quiet the shipment will be sent through.
Henry Chowl
Line Treasurer

Turning to Duncan, the woman smiled ruefully. "I should've known," she said, "something would go wrong somewhere. I thought I had a fortune." She began to laugh hysterically.

Duncan stood up, his knees shaking as a terrible wave of remorse washed over him. He had killed two men for a worthless scrap of paper. Cora's laughter bounced back from the stockade walls around them. She began tearing the letter into small pieces.

Above her laughter, Duncan heard something else then, something which made the blood run cold in him. He broke and ran for the stockade gate. Abruptly, Cora was silent, and the sounds from the desert were clearly audible.

Knowing what he would see when he peered through the porthole in the gate, Duncan looked, anyway. Stretching from north to south, spread out in a single line, their horses kicking up a drifting cloud of dust, rode Geronimo's men, coming swiftly toward the stockade, their high shrieks sounding like the screams of death.

"What is it?" Cora shouted, joining Duncan. "It sounds like—"

Wheeling, Duncan nodded. "It is! They must've ambushed Cap'n Richardson! Get the coach crew's guns!"

He leaped to the rampart which ringed the walls, drawing his revolver. The Apaches were coming on as if nothing in the world could stop them.

IN DESPERATION, although the Indians were beyond range, Duncan began firing, running along the rampart so that his shots came from several spots along the wall.

He saw one of the Indians dart ahead of the others and raise an arm.

The signal was repeated all along the advancing line, and the Indians reined their horses. Duncan realized that the impression he had wanted to give had been effective. The Apaches, thinking that he had been left alone after Captain Richardson's departure, were surprised to see what apparently were several guns from different parts of the stockade.

Cora came running along the rampart, her hands full of guns.

"Here," she gasped. "Think you can hold them off?"

Duncan took the new weapons and handed her his empty revolver and his ammunition belt.

"For a spell, anyways," he said. "Can you load that gun?"

"I have an idea how," said Cora.

Duncan raised his head above the wall to see the Apaches breaking into three groups, one to charge the front of the stockade, the others to encircle it. He realized that he and the woman would have no chance when the assault came, no matter how he tried to fool the Apaches into believing that they were going against more than one man.

He realized, also, that until the Indians had their attack ready there would be a chance to make a break through the rear of the stockade. His horse was saddled in the stable and, with luck, he might be able to escape.

"I reckon you're a fair shot, Miss Hendricks," he said quickly. "When the charge comes, fire as fast as you can. I'm going round to the back to keep 'em busy there."

Cora nodded, slamming closed the gun which she had just reloaded.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Duncan," she said, flashing a nervous smile.

Duncan left her with two of the guns and keeping his head low, ran along the rampart to the rear of the stockade behind the cabin. When he saw that she would be unable to observe him, he leaped to the ground and made for the stable.

Faintly, from beyond the northern and southern sides of the stockade, he could hear the movements of the encircling Apache groups. Hugging the side of the cabin, he reached the stable door, but at

that moment, Cora Hendricks came around the other side of the cabin, her skirts rustling loudly as she ran.

"I thought you might be trying something like this, Mr. Duncan," she gasped, aiming her two guns at him.

Duncan was unable to raise his own revolver, knowing that this woman would not hesitate to shoot him.

"I've got one thing left me," she went on evenly. "I can still marry Captain Bates in Fentonville. Now stand back!"

Keeping him covered, she opened the stable door and glanced inside. "It was kind of you to have him ready for me, Mr. Duncan."

Helplessly, as the sounds of the approaching Apaches increased, Duncan watched her lead the horse out and mount. She sat as no woman he had ever seen but prepared to ride like a man instead of sidesaddle, her wide skirts piled across the pommel in front of her.

"Now, open that rear gate," she ordered. "Quickly!"

With his guns still in his hands, Duncan went to the rear gate behind the stable and sliding the bolt free, opened it.

Jerking her legs back, Cora Hendricks smashed her heels into the horse's sides. The animal snorted in surprise, reared, and went charging out through the gate.

The air was suddenly filled with the whoops of the Apaches and the thunder of many hoofs. Duncan knew they had spotted her. Swiftly he closed the gate again, then mounting the rampart, peered over the wall.

Cora Hendricks was riding hard with the Indians from the north and south sides of the stockade converging into a single pack closely behind her.

Duncan watched in horror as one redskin rode out ahead of the others and raising his right arm, let fly a tomahawk.

It struck the woman between her shoulder blades. With a high, piercing scream, she toppled to the ground.

A few of the Apaches rode in pursuit of her horse, others halted over her body, and the rest wheeled to come at the stockade. Duncan could hear that the Indian party in front was also charging. Desperately, in panic, he began shooting as he ran along the rampart. But when he was opposite the cabin, he saw the painted faces of the Indians who had already reached the front wall.

They were coming into the stockade!

He realized in a flash that they would soon get him if he remained in the open. He jumped to the ground and darted for the cabin. Arrows were sailing close to him, but he was unhurt as he gained the door.

In a quick glance backward, he saw that one of their flaming shafts had struck the hay which earlier he had stuffed into the crevices along the stockade walls. The flames spread rapidly.

Breathless, he slammed shut the cabin door and went to the window. Raising his revolver, he took aim at an Apache who was crossing the open ground. He squeezed the trigger, but the gun did not fire. Swearing aloud, he threw it away and aimed with his other weapon. It, too, was empty!

The yard was filled with Apaches now. He could hear their feet above him even, on the roof.

With a sickening *whoosh* an arrow crashed into his chest.

Duncan staggered backward, his hands groping for the deadly shaft, but somehow he was unable to touch it.

His strength gone, he fell to the floor and rolled on his side. The last things he was able to see were Billy Reynolds and Hank Bardow lying near him, the arrows with which he had slain them protruding from their bodies.

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The Dancing Monkeys' Gold

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

WHEN Jeff Nelson returned to Prescott one June day in 1949, it marked the end of his fifty-fifth year hunting gold in Arizona. His seamed face, leathery skin, and gaunt frame showed it. He had prospected all over the state and had also looked for a few "lost mines" in his time. But an inner excitement greater than ever before would not be stilled when he sought his friend, an Italian who had grubstaked him a dozen times. He could barely contain himself.

After red wine was poured, Jeff drew a small oblong metal box from the side pocket of his patched coat and placed it on the table. The Italian picked it up, merely curious for a moment, and then he almost dropped it in sheer amazement.

"This comes from the musica box!" he gasped incredulously. "It was made in Italy a long time ago, because it is partly of lead!"

The True Story of a Lost Mine That Stayed Lost

Jeff's washed-out eyes sparkled like twin coals of fire. "Open it," he bade huskily.

A Clue to Lost Gold

His friend did so, lifting out two pieces of paper so aged they broke apart when spread. One was a map, drawn in lead pencil. On both sides of the second was written the detailed description of a specific locality. The penciled words had faded until many were no longer legible. The few that could be made out left little doubt as to their importance.

Here at last was the real thing, the final clue to lost gold. Something often hoped for, though probably neither man ever really believed such good fortune would happen to him. Jeff's friend grinned as he realized why the old man came to him in a hurry. The writing was in Italian, and he spoke words slowly, interpreting carefully for Jeff's benefit. When he had deciphered all that was possible, he leaned back in his chair, a great nervousness upon him.

"You have found the Golden Ledge of the Dancing Monkeys!" he cried. "Jeff, from the marker they measured the distance in a man's steps—"

"So I guessed," Jeff broke in quickly. "I saw the cross on the big rock and found the box under it. Before that, at a seeping spring, I also found pieces of rusted metal, parts of saddles, and other old things in the sand. But tell me—" he leaned forward in his chair—"how many steps from the marker do I take to the ledge?"

"Three hundred and sixteen due west," the Italian read, continuing until the legible part of the description was completed.

When he finished, Jeff nodded and got to his feet. "I can go straight to it. When I return, we will both be rich men!"

"It actually does exist, the gold of the Dancing Monkeys!" the Italian cried. "The story about my countrymen was all true, and after these many years you have found it."

Jeff left Prescott within the hour, such was his eagerness to get back. His camp and his burros were still on the site where he found the metal box, and supposedly he went straight there with only one stop on the way. The place, as he described it to his friend, was approximately sixty miles west of Prescott.

Italian Fortune Hunters

The story of the Dancing Monkeys' Gold, or the Organ Grinders Lost Gold Ledge—the name doesn't matter—is a fabulous one that began in the summer of 1867. Three Italians left La Paz, heading for the gold diggings around Prescott. They had recently come from their homeland to San Francisco and had gone down the west coast and up the gulf and the Colorado River by boat to Ehrenberg. In La Paz, already fading as a gold producing area, they outfitted themselves with three horses and a mule.

They carried only a little water and some grub, mistakenly intending to live off the country. Most of their load consisted of hand organs and three trained, dancing monkeys. It was with these and not pick and shovel that they planned to make their fortune in the new world.

Greenhorns in the harsh desert country, the Italians took off in a direct line for Prescott. Which meant into the burning desert, over a mountain range, across the Plomosas, and back into sandy wastes that almost finished them. But they were hardy men who survived these rigors and in the process found and revived an aged Mojave Indian man.

Unknown to the Italians, the Indian tribesmen had taken him out there and abandoned him to die. Revived with almost their last sip of water, the old man was grateful. He pointed north toward a dark ground mass that could be only timber and made drinking signs. The Italians turned off their direct route, and it was thus they arrived on the Santa Maria River east of where the Big Sandy joins it to form Bill Williams River.

Here they shot a deer and while recovering their strength discovered that the

old Mojave spoke Spanish. The youngest of the Italians understood it after a fashion and was able to make out what the old man sought to tell them. Being an outcast, he could not return to his tribe on the Colorado River. If they would take him on with them, he would show them much gold for saving his life.

Enjoying visions of getting rich quickly, the men crossed the river and after two slow days of traveling, arrived on a clear running stream in a canyon. When asked where the gold was, the Mojave pointed at his feet, and right there camp was pitched. But there was no gold in the ground on that site, and the next morning the Italians began searching the canyon. Within a couple of hours they came upon a thick ledge of quartz in a cove. It had broken off in large chunks from which the gold could be picked. That in the vein could be hammered loose with stones.

The Mojave's Warning

Jabbering away at each other happily, they broke out the larger pieces of gold and put them into small sacks. Late in the afternoon, when they had a large quantity, they covered the exposed vein with ordinary rocks. They made a marker to identify their claim, drew a map of the location, and wrote out a careful description. This they buried in a metal box under the monument they had made.

The aged Mojave warned them that his tribe's ancient enemies, the Hualapai Indians, used the area as a route on their way to plunder settlers on the fringe of the desert. To avoid danger the Italians packed up that night and set forth to the south.

Across the river they turned east and worn out near noon of the next day, made camp at a spring. The deer meat was exhausted, and they decided to remain over on the chance of killing game the following morning. But when the darkness before dawn drew down, a marauding band of Hualapais, who had spied their stock, jumped them.

In the fight one horse was killed, and two Italians and the old Mojave were clubbed to death. The youngest one, who spoke Spanish, escaped and hid all that day in the rocks.

Finally deciding the Indians were gone, he returned to the wrecked camp, cremated the bodies of the dead, and released the monkeys. Being far gone physically, there was little else he could do. Cramming the small sacks of gold into his pockets, he set off to the southwest in the hope of finding help.

Very soon he began to stagger and wander aside. Unknown to him, not many miles due east, there were soldiers and settlers on Date Creek. Yet considering the exhausted man's condition, the wonder is that he managed to survive long enough to reach the freighting road that ran from the Martinez Mining District to Wickenburg. He did gain it, however, and collapsed on the sand.

That same day a southbound freighter and his helper discovered the Italian and took him into the lead wagon. He was revived and by the time night camp was pitched was able to talk. Attracted by the camp fire, another freight outfit, this one going north, pulled off the trail. Other riders arrived, too, and all in all, quite a group sat around, trying to make sense out of what the dying man tried to tell them.

Using broken Spanish and a few English words picked up at La Paz, he made them understand about their tribulations en route to the Santa Maria River, and the tragic deaths of his companions. Strength returned in the excitement of reliving the story, and he proved his tale of gold by producing the sack. His listeners examined the gold, small bits of quartz still clinging to some pieces.

One of the lean riders, a sixgun thonged to his right knee, strode to the freighter who had found the Italian. "Where did you pick up the man?" he demanded.

The freighter considered him, saw all the other hard, intently-watching eyes around the fire, and knew he himself would never have a chance at trying to find the gold-bearing ledge. The gold lust,

that fatal lure to so many men who lost their lives because of it, possessed their greedy souls. So he told them where, and the riders were off immediately.

Long before dawn the northbound freighters were gone, too. They unspanned on the spot where the dying man had been found and streaked recklessly into the northwest after the gold.

"Find the Monkeys"

"Find them damned monkeys, and there's a king's riches!" some said.

Yet in that they were sadly in error. The three released monkeys had lost no time seeking civilization—and food. They went to upper Date Creek where, reverting to the wild, they lived for more than a decade. One was caught easily and for several years was kept in a Prescott saloon where it amused the crowd by dancing on the bar top. Prospectors and adventurous men in their cups would consider the monkey wistfully and mutter, "If I could only talk monkey lingo for two minutes, I'd be the richest man in Arizona."

For the Dancing Monkeys' Gold, as the lost ledge became known, was not found by those who sought it immediately. The survivor of the Indian fight started on with the wagons for Wickenburg but died on the way. He was buried beside the trail, and the freighter took his gold.

For the next thirty years prospectors combed the territory lying above the Santa Maria River and east of Big Sandy. They literally turned it upside down, all to no avail. With the turn of the century, the story of the monkeys and the Italians became steeped in fanciful yarning and took on the flavor of a legend. One of the more impossible stories claimed that numerous progeny of the monkeys could be found all through the country where they had been freed.

Jeff Nelson's Search

One of the seekers who explored every clue, listened to each whispered word, and culled them for a single grain of fact was Jeff Nelson. Time and again he abandoned the search for the Gold of the Dancing Monkeys to prospect elsewhere. He found gold, too, and sold promising claims or worked out small pockets to his advantage. Yet always the story of the Italians and their monkeys haunted him.

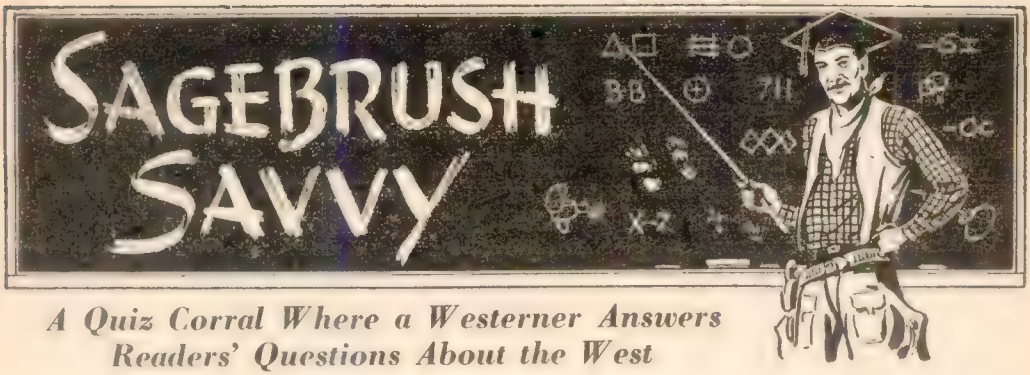
During his long search Jeff formed definite theories. It wasn't said what language the description was written in, but he reasoned it must necessarily be Italian. There would, then, be no mistake about the discovery if and when he found the marker. If the area in which the ledge was located had also been a route for raiding Hualapais from the north to the fringe of the settlements, then their trail would have been through every possible concealment. Therefore, as Jeff told his Prescott friend, he needed only to locate a *natural* runway that would have afforded cover for Indians of long ago and then search where no white men had been.

That was how he found the marker in 1949 and by the light of his campfire opened the metal box containing the strange writing, undecipherable to him. He rode one of his burros out to a ranch and borrowing a saddle horse, hurried to Prescott.

He came back to the ranch and returned the horse. Astride his burro and with a water canteen slung over one shoulder, rode west into the falling shades of another night.

Did Jeff really find the lost gold at last? No one knows for certain, but many who knew him believe that he did finally reach his goal. If so, the monument also became his gravestone, for from that day to this Jeff Nelson has never been seen again. He vanished into the unknown wild lands north of the Santa Maria.

Two bands of riders searched for his body, because cowmen who knew him were convinced he died in an accident or from old age. They failed, but perhaps in the years to come his bones will be found under the quartz ledge that marks his last resting place, and the discoverer will reap the rich reward that was denied Jeff Nelson.



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Where could we see a really western rodeo in June?—A.N. (N.J.).

A.—Redding, Calif., June 5-6; Livermore, Calif., 13-14; Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 14-19; Tucumcari, N. Mex., 18-20; Sisters, Oregon, 20-21; San Juan Bautista, Calif., 28; Alliance, Nebraska, around the last of June.

Q.—What becomes of rattlesnakes in cold weather?—Andy (Ill.).

A.—They hole up in dry caves or underground dens, often hundreds of them together, where they become very sluggish but do not actually hibernate—that is, go into a winter sleep.

Q.—What was the most famous cattle brand of the early west?—W.W.J. (Mich.).

A.—That would be a matter of opinion. Some famous old brands of the southwestern cow country where I live were the Bell, the Diamond A, the Turkey Track, the Three D's, the WS, the Pitchfork, the XIT, the Hashknife, the Mule Shoe, the Running W., the JA Connected. Cattle King John Chisum's Jinglebob ear mark was more famously known than his Rail brand.

Q.—I have heard that somebody has invented a "mechanical calf" for rodeo calf ropers to practice on. Is this true?—Al D. (Tex.).

A.—Yes, an outfit at Sheridan, Wyo. has devised, makes and sells a dummy calf made of plywood and pine lumber, put together with pivot joints and a dozen or so stout springs so that it offers lifelike resistance to being thrown down and hogtied, automatically scrambling back to a standing position whenever turned loose. It does not run, hence gives the roper no practice in catching, but only in throwing down and hogtying. I've never seen one of these bovine Charley McCarthies, but I understand some rodeo hands have found them useful in speeding up their tying time, especially since most ranchmen these days will not permit cowboys to practice roping on their high priced beef stock. Incidentally, these calves are whitefaced Herefords!

Q.—In what part of the state is the so-called "Texas Hill Country" located, and about how high is it?—O.T.R. (Minn.).

A.—South-central Texas, fanning out northeast, north, but mostly northwest from 20 to about 120 miles from San Antonio, chiefly oak timbered hills at altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 feet above sea level. It is a cattle, sheep, Angora goat and dude ranch country, well stocked with deer and turkeys. Some wheat farming in the valleys. Some hill country towns are Bandera, Kerrville, Boerne, Junction and Fredericksburg.

Q.—Is a quilted cotton saddleblanket all right under a western saddle?—J.K.Jr. (Wash., D.C.).

A.—For ordinary, not too strenuous pleasure riding, yes. But cowboys prefer a hair pad or a Navajo Indian blanket of heavy woyen wool. Besides serving as a protective padding between saddle and horse's back, a saddleblanket should absorb sweat readily.

Q.—Was Billy the Kid cross-eyed?—Beth D. (Wis.).

A.—The one authentic surviving photograph of William Bonney shows him somewhat bucktoothed, but not cross-eyed.

—S. Omar Barker

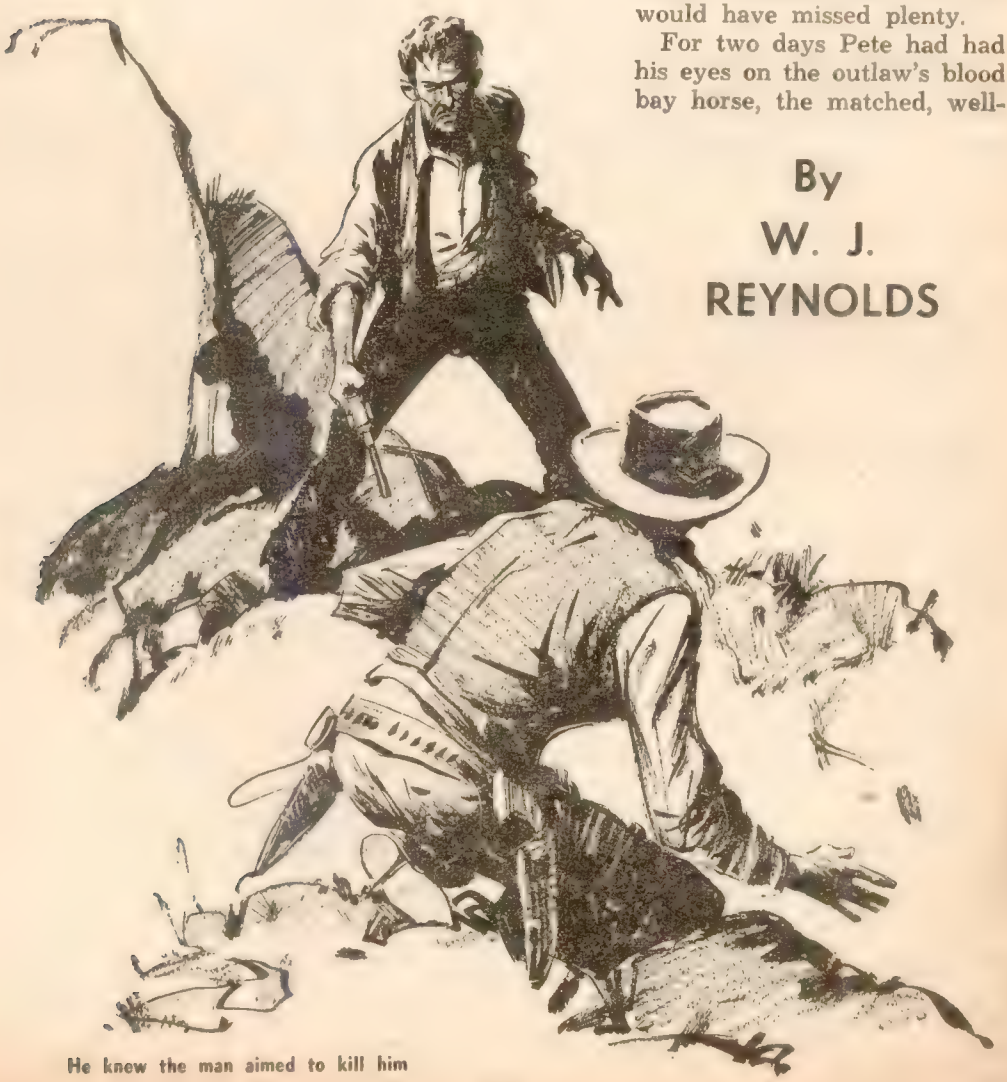
The Devil Walks Loudly

Pete Lally talked so big and often he began believing his own lies . . .

By W. J. REYNOLDS

THE OUTLAW died an hour after sunup, and with his usual self-deception, Pete Lally wouldn't allow himself to face his own great relief because the man hadn't died during the night. Pete would have fled in terror of the silent, stiffening body and he would have missed plenty.

For two days Pete had had his eyes on the outlaw's blood bay horse, the matched, well-



He knew the man aimed to kill him

oiled six-shooters, and the fine clothes he'd glimpsed in the man's saddlebags. But even with the sun lifting hotly over the desert arroyo into the Arizona sky, it was another hour before Pete could bring himself to strip the guns from the dead man.

It was while he was taking the guns off that Pete discovered the money-belt. The belt was full, and with shaking hands and moving lips, Pete counted the money. Six thousand dollars. All yellowbacks except four hundred in gold eagles.

"Gawd A'mighty!" Pete said, his voice cracking on a high note. "I'm rich!" Not for a second did Pete think of the money in any other way than his own.

The possibilities, as Pete began thinking of them, awed him for a short time until the exultation began to take effect. Why, with that much money he could honky-tonk to his heart's content. Then there were the guns and the horse that would make any man look twice. Especially the guns, those matched Colt .45s would bring a respectable silence in any saloon.

Pete pulled his own old six-shooter from a patched trousers pocket and looked at it with contempt. He wiggled the loose cylinder that wouldn't line up but three chambers with the barrel, then threw it far out into the sand. He looked at his weather-cracked saddle, kicked it, and moved on to cut the tie rope from the ewe neck of his crowbait pony.

"Rustle your own damn grub from now on," Pete said. "I got a real horse."

The loudness of his own voice startled Pete for a moment and made him dart a quick look at the dead man. He got scared all over again as he thought of how he had stumbled upon the cold-eyed stranger here two days ago. The man had been lying here, propped against the bank of the arroyo near the muddy water hole. He had been dying from a day's old bullet wound that was festering and gangrenous in his thigh.

"Get down, kid, and stake out your nag," the man had said. "Stay a day or so."

IT HADN'T been an invitation but an order. Pete had stayed. He had been afraid not to with the outlaw's nervous hands always near those .45s. The nights had been agony for Pete, staked to the outlaw with a two-foot piece of rope.

But Pete was glad now. "To hell with him," he snarled. "If I'd had a decent gun I'd of shot him. Tell Pete Lally what to do, huh?" He glared at the dead man. "Lay there, damn you, and rot and see if Pete Lally cares!"

A short time later, Pete Lally rode out of the arroyo. He felt good, damn good. Between his legs was the blood bay, stepping proudly, powerful muscles moving smoothly. And on Pete's skinny body were the silk shirt, Oregon pants and soft boots from the saddlebag. Around his waist was the carved leather belt supporting the matched Colt six-shooters. Pete kept lifting the guns, feeling the deadly power of them, and mumbling his admiration for the figure he cut with them thonged to his legs.

By hell, wouldn't nobody give Pete Lally no back lip now. Wouldn't nobody boot his back end and call him a loud-mouthed kid like men usually did. If anybody had the guts to try it now, Pete Lally would shoot the guts out of them!

He had the world by the tail. The horse was a powerful northern animal, the saddle was a dally rig; Montana maybe, or Idaho. He didn't have to worry about anybody recognizing the outfit. The man who was dead now had come a far piece, and if he was ever found, he would be just an unexplained skeleton in the desert.

Pete decided he'd sure give the next town a treat. He'd ring his gold on the counter and swing the girls and nobody would have the cast-iron guts to call his hand. Not Pete Lally with the matched Colts.

Pete rubbed his thin jaw reflectively. Maybe he ought to have another name, a name to go with the outfit he wore, something to hang in a man's ear.

He rode into Elk City two days later, a little cowtown on the rim of the mountain range and far enough from the desert

to forget the dryness and a sun-bloated dead man. Pete put the bay up at the livery, tossed the hostler a gold piece and went straight to the Elk Saloon. He spun another gold piece on the bar.

"Whisky," Pete said. He turned to survey the room that held half a dozen men at this hour of mid-afternoon. Pete gave them his coldest look, copied from the dead man, and faithfully practised the last two days. "Step up to the brass, gents," Pete said, "and have a drink on the Cherrycow Kid."

They stepped up and hoisted their glasses. "Here's how, Kid." "Mud in your eye, Cherrycow." "To you, Kid." There was respect and cautiousness in them, and Pete's scrawny chest swelled under the silk shirt.

"Who's gonna preach the funeral over this town?" Pete asked loudly. "Bet they ain't a man here can holler above a whisper!"

"We have our days," a man said cautiously.

"I bet," Pete said. "Hell, reckon a gunshot would scare the daylights out of the whole town!"

"Burt Osage usually does the hollering and shooting around here," another man said.

Pete glared at the man. "Who the hell is Burt Osage? Never heard of him. Where is he?"

"Burt's gone south for a spell," the man said. "On a little business."

"Damn good thing too," Pete snorted. "For him."

IT WAS free whisky and they listened to him and watched him get drunk, and then all they could do was listen. Pete talked loud and he bragged to hell and gone about his past exploits.

"Why, hell," Pete hollered, "if I'd put my credits on these guns, the damned handles would be hacked off! But I ain't a fool. Too many names loose for a man to let any lawdog get his teeth into any one! But they ain't a one of you sheepherders ever heard tell of the Cherrycow Kid. But you'll remember him if I can find a man in this town with the guts to face up to me! But the next time after this when I decide to tree a town won't nobody there have heard of me either. I ain't a fool. Why hell's fire, if I'd used the same name all the time, letting my rep stack up, ain't a man here wouldn't jump clean out of his boots just to hear it spoke!"

Pete tossed off another drink from the well-lowered bottle before him and glared drunkenly around. "Any of you got any friends in Socorro? Ask them who it was that slapped the buck teeth loose in Billy the Kid's jaw and told him to draw his guns! They'll tell you. Billy's a four-flusher and didn't have the gall to match my draw!"

Men looked at Pete, at each other, and then at the deadly-looking guns on Pete Lally. Drunk as he was, Pete didn't miss those glances, for he'd counted on them. These men knew well-cared-for guns when they saw them, and for as long as Pete could remember he'd admired and studied guns and gunmen. Pete knew how to wear the pair he carried.

Despite his loud mouth and bragging, Pete wore the guns with a flair, and as the days passed he gained the confidence that was only pretended at first. With whisky in him the confidence increased dangerously. Occasionally his thin face would get a frozen, set look that made men move uneasily. Pete didn't know how he looked at those times when he felt especially mean, but he got a good look one day in the back-bar mirror, and it scared him sober for half an hour.

After that he capitalized on the expression. Pete used it on one of the second string badmen of Elk City. He used it drunkenly and without thinking until he'd already issued his challenge. When the local badman talked back to Pete, Pete snarled at him, his face falling into the vicious pattern:

"Get out of town, you damned four-flusher! Be gone in ten minutes or start shooting!"

As the badman glowered, Pete felt the whisky oozing out of him, dying to let

paralysis make him unable to move. But it also left his face white to go with the expression that froze on it, making him look even more vicious.

The badman paled too, then whirled and plunged for the door and was gone. Pete leaned against the bar and nearly lost his guts, but he managed to hold the sickness down.

He snarled at the bartender in dead silence, "Set 'em up. What the hell's wrong with you? Ain't you never seen a real gunhand puncture a fake badman's windbag?"

"All right, Cherrycow, all right," the barman said hurriedly.

Pete kept up his show for a week, and made the most of it. He had his pick of the dancehall girls, and he wined them and dined them, and slapped gold and yellowbacks on the bar. He swaggered and swung the girls while the local slick hairs glowered at him furtively but had nothing to say except to mutter something about Burt Osage. Pete bragged and strutted and whipped the town with his bobwire tail.

But the sheriff had begun to worry Pete. The lawman was a quiet man with a trimmed mustache and intelligent gray eyes. He obviously figured he had enough to do without challenging every self-styled badman that came along, and was willing to let them alone if he had no poster on them, and they only talked. He kept dropping by the saloon and eyeing Pete silently, but never calling him down; just looking.

PETE didn't miss the quiet speculation on the sheriff's face most of the time when he was around the Cherrycow Kid.

Finally the sheriff began to speak softly to sundry citizens, who would nod thoughtfully, some of them angrily. To the angry ones, the sheriff spoke longer, his hands moving gently, emphatically. The angry citizens would finally nod and be silent. It got on Pete's nerves.

Then Burt Osage came back to town. Pete laughed loudly when he saw the rider before the saloon. He rode a sorry horse, was ragged, and one of his two holsters was empty. A two weeks' beard covered his flat face and his brown eyes were bloodshot and sunken. Here was a man who'd had a long and rough pull and most of it in the brush.

Pete's laughter thinned a little when men moved away from him and several of the discontented slick hairs grinned expectantly. Pete snarled at the bartender, "Who the hell's the scarecrow?"

The bartender's eyes were bigger than usual, worried. "Burt Osage," he said, and started moving down the bar, polishing busily.

"Damn it, I'm talking to you, feller!" Pete snarled.

The bartender stopped reluctantly. "All right, Kid, all right. Burt's been down south on some business. Looks like he had a run of bad luck. Had a fine black horse when he left. Rurales across the Border been laying for Burt. Looks like they sort of pushed him." He added hastily, "Just a guess, of course. Burt said he was going to visit his ma in Nogales."

Pete was temporarily subdued, but that could be put down to one gunman sizing up another, and no one thought differently. Pete leaned on the bar as Osage came into the saloon. Burt Osage looked mean enough to suit anybody. His face was crusted with dirt under his beard and his eyes had a vicious glare. There was a bulge under his shirt at his left shoulder that was obviously a bandage.

He slapped his hands on the bar. "Whisky." He drank four in a row, then without a glance at anybody, he moved dazedly for the stairs in the rear and up to his room.

"Hell," Pete snarled, "he didn't look so tough to me!" He saw the way men glanced quickly at the stairs before they came back to the bar to drink Pete's whisky. "How come the lawdog don't clip Osage's tail feathers if he's such a bad one?"

"Burt stays clean here," the bartender said. "He ain't wanted here."

Burt Osage slept the clock around, ate

and slept some more, and when he finally showed up in the barroom, he was clean-shaven and had on clean clothes. He looked a different man except for the mean eyes. He'd been hearing about Pete, for he looked at the self-styled Cherrycow Kid with a blank face, looked at the matched six-shooters and the way Pete wore them. He leaned against the bar and ran the tip of his tongue over his lips and in a quiet voice asked for whisky.

Pete laughed and as Burt glared at him, his face fell into the frozen pattern. He roughly elbowed a man away from Osage and confronted him at the bar.

"I hear you're a man with a bobwire tail," Pete said loudly.

Men moved hurriedly away from them, and Burt Osage looked at Pete with his mean eyes for a long moment, his indecision plain. Instinctively Pete crowded his advantage.

"Well?" he snarled.

Osage carefully moved the bottle of whisky down the bar to Pete. "Have a drink, Cherrycow," he said.

Pete stared another half minute, then he let his look go with a swagger. "You pouring, Burt?" he said.

Osage's face got tight, but he poured Pete's glass full and they drank. Pete surveyed the barroom and the blank faces and gave them his nasty grin.

AFTER that Burt Osage kept to himself and watched Pete, listened to his barking and bragging without expression other than that in his eyes. They began to take on a calculating glint. As the days passed, every way Pete turned he was liable to see Burt Osage's speculative glances, and the glances were growing more pronounced, as if Burt Osage had about made up his mind to change his opinion of the Cherrycow Kid.

Pete had natural cunning, and with the sheriff and Burt Osage both watching him, it came to Pete that his time in Elk City was about up. Somebody was going to call his hand. The town was getting fed up with the Cherrycow Kid.

The fifth morning after Osage's return, Pete downed enough whisky to stop his shaking, then went to the livery and saddled his horse and tied him in front of the saloon. He went back inside and held forth over a drink.

"Getting out of this lousy town," he said. "I hear there's a war up in Wyoming. Figure I'll drift up that way and maybe get a chance to bust a cap. Men up there might have guts instead of alkali water in their bellies!"

That was shortly before noon, and two hours later he was still at it, telling them about their town and the gutless state of their collective bellies. He was going good when the sheriff came down the street on a lathered horse and pulled up before the saloon.

"Out!" the sheriff bawled. "Everybody out here."

In two minutes the sheriff had half the town gathered around his sweating horse.

"It's Avery Robure," the sheriff told them. "I just came from Big Thicket. The sheriff from Cibo is there with a posse. Robure's in the thicket someplace, on foot and wounded. He robbed the Cibo bank this morning, killed a bank teller, and later killed a farmer and took his horse. Robure is wounded, too, pretty bad the Cibo sheriff thinks. The posse found the farmer's horse at the thicket, run to death. I want every man I can get to help beat through that thicket. The Cibo sheriff will hold the other side with his six men."

The sheriff's glance moved over the men and came to rest on Pete Lally.

Pete had moved out of the saloon with the others, reluctantly giving up the center of the stage. He didn't like this new turn of events, and had the uneasy feeling that he should have played it smart and been two hours out of Elk City. He glared back at the sheriff.

The officer's lips lifted a little under his mustache, a grim humor in his sweaty face. "Lucky you ain't rode out yet, Cherrycow," he said. "We'll need you today, bad. Robure is a tough hand, a real mean man with a gun. But he oughtn't to be too much of a chore for a man of

your double-barreled caliber! There's a thousand-dollar reward from the Cibo bank too!"

Pete's thin face was toughly set. "Try and stop me from collecting it, lawdog!" He spat in the dust and hitched up his six-shooters. "Hell, a tinhorn bank robber!" But under his breath he was cursing the sheriff viciously.

Burt Osage was watching Pete, too, and his eyes had a calculating shine. Pete cursed him also.

The sheriff grinned. "You ought to've been using your real name, Kid. If Robure had known you were around here he'd likely have lit out for Canada!"

Osage laughed loudly and others near him laughed, too, but those near the scowling Pete only looked cautiously at Pete. The sheriff said sharply, "All right, men, let's go."

There was a scramble for horses. Men ran for the livery and homes.

An hour later the posse pulled up at the edge of the Big Thicket, thirty square miles of jumbled rock and shale and brush and stunted trees. The sheriff waited for men to leave horses, buggies and wagons, and gather round him.

Then he said, "The Cibo posse ain't many, fellers, but it will cover the other to see Robure don't get away. We'll go through. All of you have heard of Robure, some of you know him. He's a killer and I want every man to be ready to shoot to kill. To get away, Robure will have to have a horse, and he'd murder his mother for one. Don't take a chance. Shoot! Now every man take a partner, and let's go."

THE SHERIFF looked at Pete again and his mustache lifted in that smile.

"I'll work alone," Pete said. He said it too loud in the quiet, and cursed under his breath. That damn sheriff! Pete's face felt stiff as a board.

Burt Osage was beside Pete. "I'll go with you, Kid. We can take him together."

Pete snarled, "Want the reward, eh? Want to replace that sorry nag and buy

[*Turn page*]

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another gun. Well, to hell with you! Nobody rides on the Cherrycow Kid's back for free! I'll spend that reward."

The sheriff grinned. "Maybe we could all go home."

A lot of men laughed this time, but Burt Osage's face got red and he glared at Pete, then around at the possemen. Others of the posse just cursed and looked at both Pete and Osage thinking, probably, of the times they had kowtowed to both these toughs, and especially to the loudmouthed kid.

Pete glared at the sheriff. "Suit yourself." He spurred his horse headlong into the stunted brush of the thicket.

But once in the ominous silence of the thicket, the stiffness left his face and it fell into a loose lump. He started to shake, then to swear in a shrill voice. He cursed the grinning sheriff who'd edged him into this hole, he cursed Burt Osage, and the thing inside himself that made his tongue loose at both ends, and he cursed the dead man whose guns he wore.

Once, from the conscious effort he'd made in the last several days to form the habit, he touched the butts of the matched Colts. He jerked his hands away shakily.

He rode deeper into the thicket, bulling through the brush and jumble of rocks and boulders. There was no sound of the posse now, and he cut sharply to the right, a plan in his head already full grown. He'd cut out and circle the thicket and enter again just before he reached the Cibo posse, and claim he'd gone all the way through.

Pete's eyes rolled, frantically seeking movement in the jumble around him. Sweat dripped off him, soaked the silk shirt, and ran down his back in ice cold rivulets. His mouth felt as if it had been packed with cotton.

Finally he became aware that his horse was limping badly, barely able to touch its forefoot to the ground. Pete furiously leaped off to lift the hoof. He found a jagged splinter of shale wedged in the frog, and he worked at it with his knife, swearing in a chill panic.

He succeeded in removing the stone, flung it away, shoved the knife in his pocket, and started to mount. He froze with a foot partly lifted, and his eyes glazed in dumb, terrible terror.

Avery Robure stood fifteen feet away.

The outlaw was a frightening spectacle. He stood on wide-spread and trembling legs. His left arm and chest were red with new and crusted blood, and his breath came in shallow, uneven gasps. His shaggy head was bent forward, eyes blinking owlishly as though he could hardly see, but their very foggy opaqueness held a terrible purpose. He held a six-shooter leveled at Pete, and the tremble of the gun seemed not to effect the accurate aim of the gaping muzzle.

Pete instinctively recognized the smeared light in those eyes, the intent behind them. It gripped him with icy fingers and turned his legs to water.

Robure aimed to kill him for his horse!

Pete screamed, and the sound of it whipped him into action. He whirled to run, but his foot turned on a rock and he fell as Robure fired. Pete's horse snorted and shied away, and Pete lay there under Robure's gun.

Pete scrabbled at the rock and gravel, trying to get to his feet, trying to run before he gained his feet. Sounds came from his mouth, the wordless sounds of terror. The spurts of smoke from Robure's gun seemed to reach his very shirt front. —

PETE didn't know when he grabbed his own guns. He only knew that he was on his knees, the businesslike six-shooters of the dead outlaw in his hands, that they were hot from exploded powder, that the blue cylinders were marked with faint patterns from the side flash.

Pete got numbly to his feet and stood looking down at Robure. The outlaw lay loosely, his smoking six-shooter still gripped in his hand. Fresh blood stained his shirt in half a dozen new places. He was dead.

Pete hefted the guns in his hands; he looked from them to Robure and back again. There was a new heat in his blood, and Pete knew that on his face was his

blank look. He stood there poised and deadly. Finally he grinned and spun the guns by the trigger guards.

When the posse arrived, Pete was carefully wiping the reloaded six-shooters. He slipped them into his holsters as the possemen gathered around, and rolled a smoke, popping the match to flame on his thumb nail. He lighted the smoke and cuffed his hat to a sharp angle.

"Took you man-eaters long enough to get here," he said. He looked at the sheriff and Burt Osage. "See any boogers?"

"Gawd A'mighty!" a posseman breathed. "He killed Robure, shot him to doll rags!"

Men gathered around to look at the dead outlaw, but the sheriff remained on his horse, amazement in his face. Pete could almost read what the sheriff was thinking. A dead man didn't bleed, and Robure had just bled plenty from those new bullet holes. Pete had killed him, no doubt about it.

The sheriff looked at Pete then, and his expression changed. Pity. It sent a furious rage through Pete. He ought to gun the damned lawdog. Pity Pete Lally, would he, the Cherrycow Kid? By hell—

Others were looking at Pete in much the same way. Unease came to Pete then. What the hell? Was the whole mess crazy? He'd killed Avery Robure and you'd think the outlaw had been a hell-screaming sky pilot! Then Pete saw the envy and greedy rage in Burt Osage's face, and it brought him back to his normal state.

To hell with them! A bunch of clod-hoppers and fools. He stared at them coldly, blankly, and the exultation came to him quickly when he saw the uneasy stir among them, saw the fear of him creep over them. They were afraid of him. He stood looking at them, his hands moving slightly over the handles of his guns, a sinister figure with a rattler's leanness. But Burt Osage was watching him with a narrow, calculating stare.

The sheriff said grimly, "The Cibo sheriff will pay you the reward. I'll send

[*Turn page*]

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a man to get him." There was no pity in the sheriff's face now, only hardness, determination. "Don't come back to Elk City, Kid, hear me?"

Pete looked at the sheriff a long time, as long as he could meet the gray-eyed stare of the officer. Then he said, "Tell that other lawdog I'll be in for my money. Tell him to have it, savvy?" He let his blank look take in all of them, then mounted and rode into the brush.

Behind him, he heard Osage say, "I'll take your message, Sheriff."

Pete Lally had to wait four days in Cibo for the reward. He did his waiting in the Cibo bars, swaggering and sneering and talking loudly, with even more overbearing gusto than he had in Elk City. He wore the mantle of the man who had killed Avery Robure for all it was worth. He had only a decrepit town marshal to watch him from the law side, and that lawman let him strictly alone.

But the Cibo sheriff, Buck Horner, was of a different stripe. He'd been busy attending to Robure's disposal, and having a talk with the Elk City sheriff. He'd been gone the greatest part of the time. The fourth day he rode into Cibo at midmorning, talked with the bank's board of directors, then sent for the Cherrycow Kid. Pete went to the sheriff's office.

HORNER slapped a stack of yellowbacks on his desk and looked at Pete Lally from cold blue eyes. "There's your money, Kid, for killing Robure. Take it and shake the dust of Cibo from your boots. Hit the road. You ain't welcome in this town. Take your damn bragging and swaggering some place else."

Pete tried his nastiest sneer. "Mighty proud of this rat-tailed town, ain't you, lawdog? Maybe I'll leave when I'm damn good and ready."

Sheriff Horner didn't change expressions. He leaned over the desk and his hard, open palm numbed Pete Lally's jaw.

"You're damned good and ready right now, ain't you, Kid?" he said.

Pete left. In a fury he went after his horse and, ten minutes later, he rode down Cibo's street. His cursing became almost audible as he saw Burt Osage leaning against the hitch-rack of a store, watching him leave.

Pete looked back at the end of the street, kept looking back as he saw Sheriff Horner cross the street to Burt Osage and stand square before him. In another minute Burt Osage was swinging onto his sorry horse and riding out of town, too, his course right angles to Pete's. Pete found a little satisfaction in the fact that Osage had been run out of town, too.

Pete camped twenty miles from Cibo that night. He was in a sour mood, and cursed the hard ground he had to sleep on and the fact that he had forgotten to get any bedding and had to use his sweaty saddle blanket. His cursing included the beans he'd opened for supper and had again for breakfast.

He was still snarling when he caught and saddled the bay. He was lifting a foot to stirrup when Burt Osage said behind him, "What's the rush, Kid. You got company."

Pete whirled, choking back his startled yell. He stared at Burt Osage who stood spraddle-legged no more than twenty feet away. Osage's eyes were hard and shiny and he was grinning, or at least, his teeth were bared. It was the kind of grin that Pete had been practising. Pete licked his lips and words failed him, refusing to come from his tight throat. Osage's grin became less a snarl and more of a grip. He seemed relieved, as though his considered judgment had been borne out.

"What's the matter, Kid? Ain't you glad to see me?" Pete didn't say anything, because he couldn't, and Osage went on, "Remember I told you I needed a stake? The rurales that I had to smoke up don't count except to keep me from going south. The thing is, I had to shoot a Arizona Ranger. See the need for a stake? I got to hike out before the sheriff gets the word on me. I need money and a good horse. Maybe a pair of matched Colts, too!" He laughed.

"What the hell you want with me?" Pete suddenly shouted, and his voice

cracked. Osage laughed again. Pete tried to bluster. "You ain't got no idea about me, have you, Osage?" He managed to bring his voice down a little. "You remember what Robure got, don't you? To hell with you and your hard luck!"

Osage's eyes shone a little brighter. "Come off it, Kid. You're only a damn windbag. I don't know how you got that outfit or how you got the guts to shoot Robure unless he was nearly dead already. Maybe the man you got them guns and horse off of was dead too, eh?"

The shock on Pete's face made Burt Osage laugh again. Pete started to shake, for he knew that Osage was going to kill him. Osage wanted that horse and the money in his belt and the guns, just like Pete had wanted them. He would leave Pete Lally swelling in the sun like Pete had left the dead outlaw, and on down the trail maybe another man, a little tougher than Burt Osage would—

Pete choked, "I'll split with you, Osage. We'll be partners—"

Burt Osage reached for his gun, slowly, his eyes hard and mean and with an opaque shine. "I'll take it all, Kid."

With a scream, Pete grabbed for his guns. Osage shot him in the chest.

Pete couldn't breathe. His chest was numb and he couldn't lift his hands to break his fall. Dumbly he stared up at Burt Osage's death grin. The sun was shining in Pete's eyes, so he couldn't see good. He tried to shut his eyes but couldn't move them. Then it started to get dark.

That was funny, because he'd just eaten breakfast, and the sun wasn't more than an hour high. •

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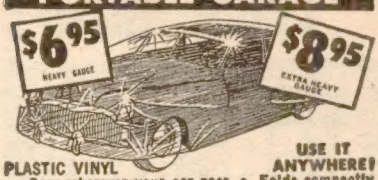

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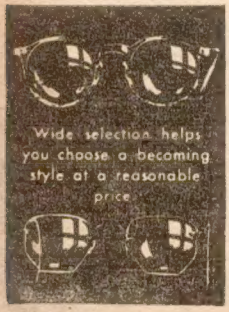

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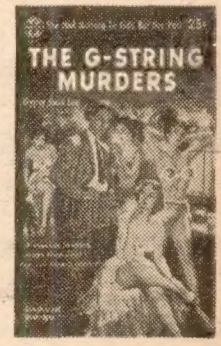

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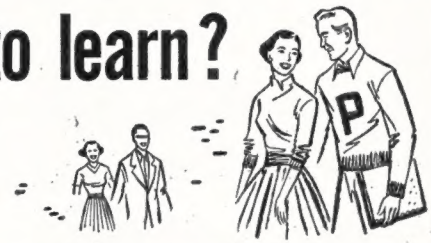

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- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ Mathematics
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Good English

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment—Metallurgy
- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
- ☐ Sheet Metal Pattern Drafting
- ☐ Refrigeration

POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Electric
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman

RADIO, TELEVISION COMMUNICATIONS
- ☐ Practical Radio—TV Eng'ring
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio and TV Servicing
- ☐ Television—Technician
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Telephone Work

RAILROAD
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Railroad Administration

TEXTILE
- ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Warping and Weaving
- ☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Textile Designing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

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